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Wild Dreams

Modi's cheetah project is falling apart

AKHILESH PANDEY

Over the past three years, the Narendra Modi government has imported 20 African cheetahs. Many of them have been moving, with their cubs, out of the area earmarked for them. After two cubs died merely two days after birth in November 2024, the number of cheetahs that have died stands at 15. International experts have raised concerns over India's lack of space and prey for the species, while experts and officials within the government who once backed the project have since been sidelined. Three foreign experts associated with the project are no longer actively involved. Wildlife experts, conservationists and bureaucrats have questioned nearly every aspect of the project, from its management and vision to the suitability of Kuno National Park as a habitat. Most of the decisions, they say, are based on fear rather than on good science. This is not conservation. It is a spectacle—one that is proving disastrous for cheetahs and the people forced to live alongside them.

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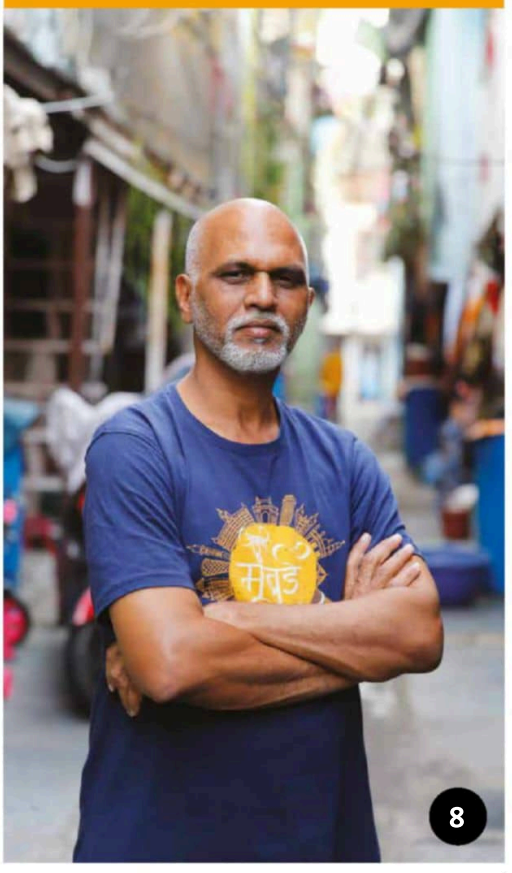

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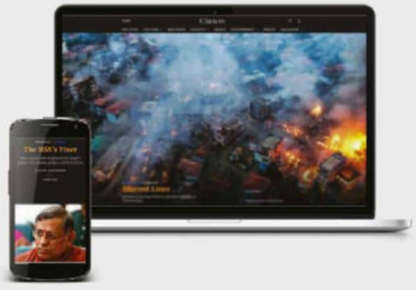

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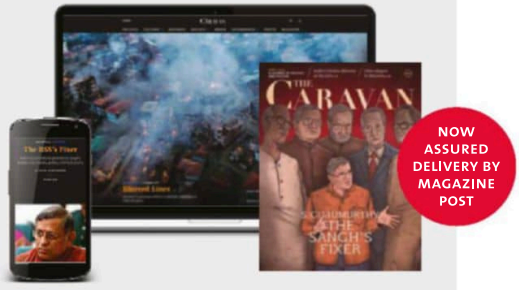

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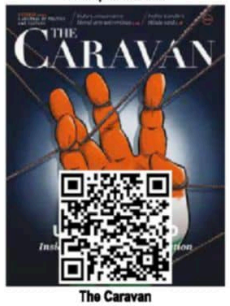

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THE INTERVIEW

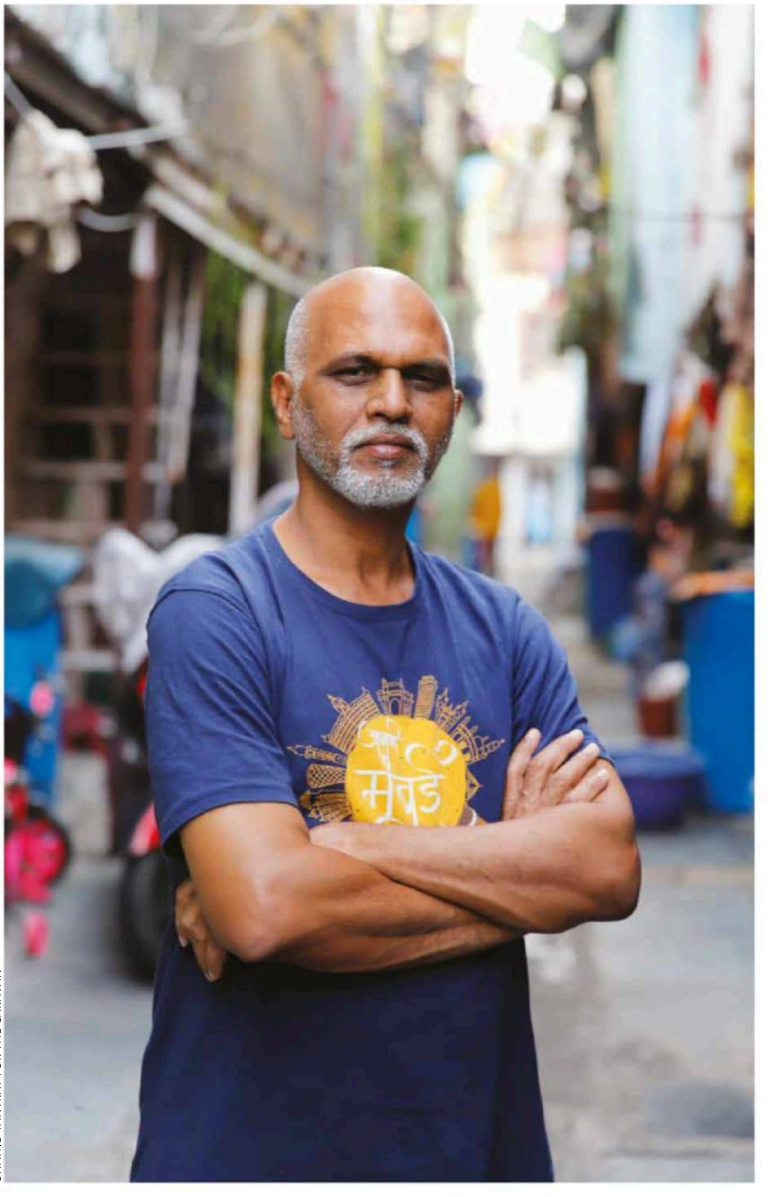
Sudhir Dhawale: "This is a bigger prison"

A Bhima Koregaon political prisoner reflects on his release

/ Politics

/ SHAHID TANTRAY

The author and activist Sudhir Dhawale was released on 24 January, after six years and seven months in jail. Dhawale, who is one of the founders of the anti-caste group Republican Panthers Jatiantachi Chalwal and the editor of the Marathi magazine Vidrohi, *was one of the organisers of the Elgar Parishad, on 31 December 2017, a day before caste violence broke out on the two-hundredth anniversary of the Battle of Bhima Koregaon. He was part of the first wave of arrests that followed, being picked up by the Pune police in June 2018 and charged under various sections of the draconian Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, with the police claiming that he was part of a conspiracy to assassinate India's prime minister, Narendra Modi. Along with another activist, Rona Wilson, he was granted bail by the Bombay High Court, in January 2025, on the grounds that their trial had not yet started. Shahid Tantray, a multimedia reporter at* The Caravan, *spoke to Dhawale at his organisation's Mumbai office.*



SHAHID TANTRAY FOR THE CARAVAN

You were in prison for over six years. How does it feel to be out?

When I came out of jail, I felt like I was moving from one prison to another. While we are in jail, the police are constantly around us. Police are with us whenever we leave our barracks for any work. Police are with us at court hearings. When we visit the hospital, the police are with us. This time, the police were not there—that is the small change—and there was a sense of calmness knowing that no one was following me, but this does not mean that we are completely free. We know that, today, all citizens of India are under so-called surveillance. We are all living under this surveillance. So, sure, we have come out of jail, but this is a bigger prison, which is open. If you want to call this freedom, that's your choice.

You were arrested before as well—in 2011, under Congress rule. Do you feel there is a difference between the two arrests?

There is not much difference. In our nation, Congress governments over the last fifty years have created draconian laws and curtailed citizens' rights on a constant basis. The Bharatiya Janata Party government is different in some ways, because it is effectively using the laws made by the Congress to choke people's voices. While it has introduced new ones, all the draconian laws were originally created under Congress rule.

My first arrest happened when the Congress and the Nationalist Congress Party were ruling Maharashtra. The police had arrested someone in Gondia and found a piece of paper with the letter "S" in their pocket. This led to the arrest of two people whose name starts with S. The first was Shailesh Wakade, the Chandrapur district president of the Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti [an anti-superstition organisation founded by Narendra Dabholkar]. Four days later, I was arrested. Many protests were held after my arrest, and politicians and social activists requested the home minister of Maharashtra to release me. However, he refused, saying, "We have proof. We can't let him go." The trial began, and, after three and a half years, I was finally released.

If you want to show the difference, you can show it in this way. The Congress government charged us under the UAPA, while these people have both invoked the UAPA and hacked into our computers to plant emails. Reports by Arsenal Consulting [a Massachusetts-based digital forensics firm] and others have brought the truth to light. Now, the onus is on the government to prove its innocence. So, the nature of governments has certainly undergone some qualitative change. We used to call the Congress government repressive, but these people have taken the path of fascism. So, this is a slight difference. The BJP is efficiently running the economic policies that were designed by the Congress.

The process of repression and the process of changing the state structure has gained pace. As a result, we see an environment of fear in our nation. It's not just Bhima Koregaon. The movement that emerged in Shaheen Bagh, in Delhi, was also suppressed by invoking a similar fictitious conspiracy and using false evidence to arrest several activists. We can see that this government has fallen low enough to use this pattern to crush various protests.

Do you think those who fight for justice are destined to be imprisoned?

Yes. We do not think that what happened to us is anything unique. This is not anything special that happened to us. People who are talking about their rights and freedom—or what happened with Rohith Vemula, which was an institutional murder. Najeeb Ahmed [a Jawaharlal Nehru University student] was made to disappear in such a way that there is still no trace of him. They say our country has become a Vishwaguru, but Vishwaguru is not able to find Najeeb Ahmed. We are aware of what his mother, fighting for justice, crying on the streets, has gone through.

But these things do not bother them. We saw this in the massacres at Khairlanji and Ramabai Colony [killings of Dalits in 2006 and 1997, respectively]. This continuing chain from Kashmir, the Northeast and the jungles of Bastar, the various people's struggles for rights, freedoms and entitlements—we think we are part of what is happening to regular people who are participating in these struggles.

How was your relationship with Stan Swamy and GN Saibaba?

I already knew Saibaba from before. I first met Stan Swamy in jail because of this case and our interaction was basic, like "Hi" and "Hello." But

our emotions are tied to the Elgar Parishad case and the way the case was fabricated—we were all experiencing a common feeling. Their deaths were due to the environment in jail. There were also two other deaths: Pandu Narote, who was part of Saibaba's case, died in Amravati jail; and, in Yerawada, Kanchan Nannaware, who is Arun Bhelke's wife, died.

What are the medical facilities in jail like?

Maharashtra's central jails are supposed to have trained doctors, pharmacists and nurses. All these posts are there on paper. None of them are filled. There are no medicines. You need to buy them. If you have money, you can get them, otherwise you are at their mercy. If you have a serious illness, you need to keep requesting them for treatment. Most of the time, all they give you is paracetamol, Antec or painkillers—whether it is for an itch, fever, headache or a serious disease. If you get a heart attack or paralysis, you do not have a very good chance of survival. There is only a chance in the rare instance that you are admitted to a hospital outside. The hospital inside the jail is in one place, and the circles [where prisoners are held] are in different areas. The staff does not come immediately. A call will go out on the walkie talkie. If there is someone, they will respond.

They will see from far—they will not even try to examine you. After this, they will say, "You can take this for now, we will see tomorrow." People have died in front of my eyes. In the last three to four months, at least three prisoners have died due to a lack of medical care. This includes my barrack in-charge. For three months, he was getting fever and kept shrinking. All the while, he was having pills. One day, after having dinner, as he was headed to sleep, he fainted. We called out for help. It took them half an hour, after which he was taken out in a stretcher. He was taken to [the state-run] JJ Hospital, where he was kept under observation for fifteen days. He died there. A young lad, 37 years old.

How was the situation during COVID-19?

COVID was horrible. The fever was extremely contagious. If one person got it, then the whole barrack had to get it. There would be headache and pain in your bones. And what was the treatment? Paracetamol. During the first round, they didn't have any kits. Then how will you test? And, if you do not test, how would you know if you have COVID or not? Hence, the numbers were never recorded. In the second round also, when there were kits, the ones with fever were not checked. Only the healthy ones were, so that numbers could be suppressed. At the time, our superintendent, [Kaustubh] Kurlekar, got a president's medal.

People died. Varavara Rao got COVID. Stan Swamy got COVID. One died due to their [the authorities] actions, and the other was also critical. It was only after there was family and international pressure that he got treatment. Otherwise, there was no chance of his survival. In this environment, where you do not get court hearings, your family and lawyer are not allowed to visit, prisoners undergo a lot of stress, and there are very good chances they become psychological patients. There are no facilities for the treatment of such conditions. There is no psychiatrist. Just some pills are given. There is no counselling.

Maharashtra no longer refers to its jails as jails. They are called *sudhar gruha* [correction homes] or *punarvasan kendra* [rehabilitation centres]. But the way of working, the structure, the hierarchy and the environment have remained the same, just like the Indian Penal Code, the Code of Criminal Procedure and the Evidence Act have been given new names. The structure is the same, the sections are the same. In fact, they have made it more brutal in an effort to increase the conviction rate. Jail is the same. Only the name has changed. Jail is an inhumane world. For common people who end up there, their chances of returning are more or less closed.

Your elder brother also died during COVID.

He died in 2021, during the second wave. He had a fever and was admitted to the hospital, but there was no space available. They said, "It's just a fever, he will recover and you take him back home." He was brought back home and died there. Several hospitals were overflowing in the country. We have been singing praises of "Viksit Bharat" ["developed India," a phrase commonly used by the Modi government], but what the people of this country suffered during the pandemic was no less haunting than an emergency. Surendra Gadling's mother, and relatives of Rona Wilson, Vernon Gonsalves and Sudha Bharadwaj, all died during this time. Some people got the opportunity to go home on parole. Others did not.

How do you view India's judiciary?

They say that India's judiciary is independent of government influence and has its own identity. But it is selective. It is not for the ordinary people of India. For them, it is just *tareeq pe tareeq* hearing after hearing. But when those who are connected to power come there there is a speedy trial for them, there is a speedy process for bail. At those times, the principle of "bail, not jail" is reiterated. However, when we and our lawyers use the same expression, the courts do not listen. They

have sympathy for upper castes and classes, who get justice immediately. There is no justice for Dalit, Adivasi, Bahujan workers and farmers, or those who belong to minorities. That is why jails in India are filled with these people.

People from the upper castes and classes are not. There are very few—a couple here or there in fraud cases. And, because of them, there is some improvement in jail. Because you need to give them decent facilities, some money is given and there is some reform. Jails and courts are part of the structure. You can see that the discrimination is also there.

The country changed dramatically during the six years of your incarceration. How do you see India now?

The country has reached a point where good people no longer find it liveable. That does not mean I do not love the country, but the dreams of the revolutionaries who fought for independence are nowhere to be seen. Whatever little spirit remained of their revolution and thoughts was reflected in the Constitution, which starts with "We the people of India." After taking the oath of office on this very Constitution, they rule, lord over and oppress these people of India.

The institutional structure that the Constitution laid out has now been concentrated in the hands of one person, or a few individuals, or just the prime minister's office. The Enforcement Directorate, the Central Bureau of Investigation, various institutions and even the Reserve Bank of India have become puppets for this person, or group of people. The Supreme Court itself has called the CBI a "caged parrot." We are seeing many such parrots emerge in our country.

The country is turning into a Hindu Rashtra. One consequence is that it is headed towards a deep state, where certain individuals become a state within a state. They are not elected by the people. They never come in front of the public. They are the ones who are really ruling. When Article 370 was removed from Kashmir and Ajit Doval stood on the streets of Kashmir to eat biryani—these are the real people who are running the country, influencing its policies.

It's all connected. Ajit Doval is one representative. Adani–Ambani is another representative. And then you have RSS–BJP leaders. And, together, they have established a rule over the majority, whose ideological essence is Brahminical fascism, because of which no other voices will be tolerated. Our country is multireligious and multilingual, with multiple castes and nationalities. But these various facets do not have space. Only one thing will be accepted. The instruments of power are aligned with these slogans of "one."

The economic crisis is deepening in our country. People's economic conditions have not improved in this period of liberalisation. Only a handful of people benefited. Yes, a middle class emerged, but even they are in crisis. During COVID-19, the backbone of small businesses was broken. What is the situation of the people? Even today, 80 crore people are being given free rations. This is a life-and-death crisis, and the government has no model to overcome it. The so-called Gujarat Model, which made its way to Delhi, was an anti-people model. The kinds of atrocities committed against Dalits, minorities, and Adivasis in Gujarat were horrifying—outright fascist. After Godhra, the entire world saw what happened.

The economic shift that started during the Congress rule slowly opened doors for international capital, which only wanted concessions. Why will they invest here? Because they want cheap labour. If they do not get labour, why will they come? If they do not get profits or tax exemptions, why will they come? That is why every party that sits in parliament today works to create laws to

The country is turning into a Hindu Rashtra. One consequence is that it is headed towards a deep state, where certain individuals become a state within a state. They are not elected by the people. They never come in front of the public. They are the ones who are really ruling.

favour them. And because of this, the crisis is deepening.

The capitalist class, which is actually running the country, wants a solution to the crisis. If there is such deep class discrimination in the society, it will lead to revolution. And capitalists across the world have learnt that revolution is dangerous, as it shrinks their market. If the revolution is to be avoided, then what options are left? The only one is religious politics. This means authoritarian politics, where the state promotes only one religion. With such politics, there is always a danger to move towards fascism. All these slogans of "one nation, one race, one language, one god, one culture" lead directly to fascism. So, the ruling capitalist class across the world takes refuge in fascism when economic crises intensify.

I am not saying that our country will have fascism similar to that of Hitler or Mussolini, because this country is very diverse. There are castes, religions, languages, genders, classes and all kinds of divisions in our country. Fascism has always existed in different forms for various groups in the country. It is not as though Modi came to power and brought fascism, or the Congress invoked the Emergency, which was fascist. The caste system in our country is also a form of fascism that has existed for thousands of years. The way women are oppressed by patriarchy is also fascism. Even the punitive codes of the *Manusmriti* were a form of fascism. Similarly, the suppression of different nationalities—our country was formed in 1947 from over six hundred princely states. What was there before that? The British or the Mughals did not run the country with the aim of nation-building. That spirit was never seen. There were a handful of rebellions against the major powers. But, because of caste, class, and gender discrimination, a nationalistic sentiment never emerged. That's why there is no other country in the world that has faced as many invasions as India.

Given the current state of the country, I don't see any difference between the opposition and the incumbent parties. They are all the same. They just want to gain power using whatever means or to maintain their influence. That's what they live for and die for.

The history of foreign invasions in India is so long that you will not find another country like this. Why did India keep losing? Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar wrote that caste never allows you to unite, which is why you kept losing. So, if you read the country's history, it is a series of defeats. And people have fought against the caste system and patriarchy. The Constitution is a collective result of all these struggles. It is a document that presents a minimal model of equality. So, we say that you should at least implement this model because you took an oath on the Constitution. Do this at the very least for the people's benefit.

You wrote two books while you were in jail.

Two have been published recently. When the Lok Sabha results were declared in 2019, I wrote a two-hundred-page book analysing Modi's first term and what the alternatives should be, but that was not published. Another book I wrote was after Article 370 was revoked, covering the nationalist movements from Sheikh Abdullah's time to the present and how they have been suppressed. It also discusses the BJP's motives behind revoking Article 370, but this book has not been published either. I wrote about the wave of youth-led uprisings across the world, which we in India saw in the form of Shaheen Bagh. That was not published either.

Then there was *Lokshahi Gaddar*, about the poet from Telangana who died last year. Gaddar's songs inspired me to join the movement. When I was in Nagpur, I used to listen to his songs. Vilas Ghogre translated his Telugu songs into Hindi and Marathi. So, after he passed away, I wrote a book about his life and his contribution to cultural politics, and that was published last year. The fifth book is *Dalit, Hindutva aur Lokshahi Kranti*. It is in Marathi and was published on 6 December.

What led you to activism? Was there someone in your family who was an activist?

No, no one from my family was an activist. I am the first. Where I grew up, there were people involved in social movements, and I felt their ideas were different. They talked about fighting for one's rights, so I joined them. Revolutionary songs also influenced me to join the movement. When I had joined college, there was a major movement demanding that Marathwada University be renamed after Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar. This struggle had been ongoing since 1978 and, by the time I got involved in activism, it was at its peak. At that time, I became very active. We shut down all the schools and college in our local area and organised marches in Nagpur. I had already understood electoral politics and realised that this struggle-based politics was something worth dedicating my life to. In 1989, I left home and have been a part of the movement ever since.

How do you view left-wing, Bahujan or opposition politics in parliament?

Given the current state of the country, I don't see any difference between the opposition and the incumbent parties. They are all the same. They just want to gain power using whatever means or to maintain their influence. That's what they live for and die for.

This morning, you mentioned that politics is meant for service—but the service is different, where they protect the wealth their families have accumulated for generations. How to safeguard these privileges for the next seventeen generations, that is what they work hard for. In parliamentary politics, we do not see any real difference among the Left, the Bahujan Samaj Party, the Samajwadi Party, the Republican Party of India, the Janata Dal, parties doing Dravidian politics or any other group, because they may believe in different ideologies but their political parties are to run this nation state. So, they are all the same, just in different forms.

If one sees any hope, it is in smaller groups and social movements outside of mainstream politics that genuinely want change and offer some hope. You do not necessarily need political power if you want to bring change at the grassroots. We can see this in the Satyashodhak movement of Mahatma Phule, Periyar's Dravidian movement and Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar's Dalit liberation movement. They managed to get many victories. I am not saying that some revolution happened, but it definitely emerged as a social revolution.

Today, most social movements are fragmented. Their voices have become confined within their own circles. If you want to challenge the incumbent powers and are looking for a path to liberation, you will have to come out of your small circle. You will need to make more friends and partner with various social movements. Ideological differences can exist, but you should try to unite over common issues.

They say that jail is meant to break a person's will. What was your experience?

No jail is strong enough to break someone's will—especially those who have been imprisoned for their ideology. There is no question about it. They say that prison has been made for that. We understand its philosophy. My comrade Sagar Gorkhe, who had already spent four years in jail, wrote a song in Marathi that says that the iron bars don't have the strength to break our spirit.

It is impossible to break the morale of people who are in prison due to their ideology because they know that, whenever they organise a movement or challenge the system, the state will retaliate. Some have been killed—like Narendra Dabholkar, who wanted to eradicate religious superstitions. Fundamentalists did not like his views and killed him. Similarly, Comrade Govind Pansare, who challenged the Hindutva narrative of Shivaji, which projects him as a cow-protecting Brahmin ally. He wrote of a Shivaji of the people, of Bahujan communities, who took minorities along. There is historical evidence as to who were his generals, bodyguards and advisors. He established a kingdom and challenged the Mughals by bringing several communities together. But these people do not like that Shivaji. Hence, Sambhaji Bhide brings a new Shivaji.

Similarly, Professor [MM] Kalburgi and Gauri Lankesh, whose views were not in line with the views of those in power. They were not terrorists. They were not traitors. They wanted to express their dissenting views. They were shot because those in power did not like their views. At least we are still alive.

There are two versions of Sudhir Dhawale in the public imagination: the cultural activist and editor, and the one who is out to assassinate Modi.

Sudhir Dhawale does not have an independent identity. Our identity is created by our work among people or our participation in people's struggles. The media trial against us did not matter much. When I was released, I came back to this place from where I was arrested. People welcomed me with a rally that ended at Babasaheb's statue. They garlanded it and held a cultural programme. So, my identity is this. When you live among the people or become a part of their struggles, they do not abandon you under some influence. People's love is what it was. That's the Sudhir people know. ■

PERSPECTIVES

Alarm Bells

The air chief marshal's warnings about the crisis in the IAF can no longer be ignored / **Security**

/ **SUSHANT SINGH**

It takes a lot for a military chief to go public with his grievances—especially under the Modi regime. That Air Chief Marshal AP Singh recently did so highlights the severity of the crisis in the Indian Air Force. He has warned that the IAF is struggling to maintain its operational edge, making it imperative to fast-track acquisitions and plug the equipment shortfall.

The Modi government recently formed a committee, chaired by the defence secretary, which has already submitted a report that has been classified as "Secret." This classification indicates that the crisis is so grave that it needs to be hidden from the public. The committee has done its job. Now, the political leadership must act.

In 2011, the IAF sent a proposal to the defence ministry to increase its sanctioned fighter aircraft strength from 39.5 to 45 combat squadrons. The rationale for this was that India should be prepared for a two-front war—a collusive threat from China and Pakistan. The Manmohan Singh government, which raised additional forces and built border infrastructure along China, sanctioned 42.5 squadrons. India currently has 31, with a very poor rate of inducting new fighter aircraft in the past decade. There are no off-the-shelf foreign procurements planned either. In 2016, the defence analyst Ashley Tellis assessed the IAF's requirement to be at least sixty squadrons.

China has advanced at an astonishing pace, and it is not just about the numbers. With the unofficial debut of two sixth-generation stealth combat jet prototypes in December, China has gained an edge over the United States. Their official designation remains unknown, but analysts have christened them J-36 and J-50. At the annual Air & Space Forces Association's Warfare Symposium in Colorado earlier this month, top US Air Force officials were emphatic about the urgency of developing their own version. "We have some choices to make as we observe what China has produced, and we can presume we know what that's for—for air superiority," General Kenneth Wilsbach, who heads the USAF's air combat command, said. "What are we going to do about it? I don't believe that nothing is an option."

The prospect of Pakistan acquiring China's advanced stealth fighters, such as the J-35A, could dramatically shift the regional balance of power and threaten India's air superiority.

India, meanwhile, is still planning for its fifth-generation Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft, which is only expected to be ready for service by 2035. By then, China would have likely reached higher levels of advancement, as would Pakistan, thanks to the deepening cooperation between the two air forces. This collaboration includes the use of advanced Chinese aircraft such as the J-10C, which are being integrated into the Pakistan Air Force. The prospect of Pakistan acquiring China's advanced stealth fighters, such as the J-35A, could dramatically shift the regional balance of power and threaten India's air superiori-

OPPOSITE PAGE: Air Chief Marshal AP Singh has warned that the IAF is struggling to maintain its operational edge, making it imperative to fast-track acquisitions and plug the equipment shortfall.

AIJAZ RAHI / AP PHOTO

ty. Christopher Clary, an associate professor at the University at Albany whose research focusses on US defence policy and the politics of South Asia, has reported that between 2014 and 2024, while China and Pakistan added 435 and 31 jets, respectively, India's inventory shrank by 151 jets.

Moreover, the PAF and the People's Liberation Army Air Force have conducted joint exercises such as the Shaheen series and the recent Indus Shield–Chinese exercise, which significantly enhances their interoperability and combat readiness. This evolving military partnership should be a cause for worry in New Delhi, as it will threaten India's security paradigm against Pakistan. In such a situation, a misadventure to fulfil the Hindutva ecosystem's ideological goal of wresting back Kashmir from Pakistan by force will push India into big trouble.

India's military capabilities have stagnated, and even declined, under Modi. The share of the GDP allocated to the defence budget has fallen to its lowest ever level in independent India, with more than half the defence spending going towards salaries and pensions. There is little left for modernisation, which cannot be compensated for by empty slogans such as "Make in India" and "Atmanirbharata." India has not acquired any modern fighter jets since the controversial Rafale deal in 2015. Meanwhile, the state-owned Hindustan Aeronautics Limited is unable to supply the indigenous Tejas light combat aircraft to the IAF because the US-based GE has not supplied the F-404 engines. This is a diplomatic failure of the Modi government, which the IAF and HAL cannot fix.

In an announcement made while Joe Biden was still US president, the Modi government hoped that HAL and GE would jointly produce a more

advanced F-414 engine in India. Government officials boasted about the transfer of technology from the United States, but no progress was made. With the new president, Donald Trump, adamant about manufacturing everything in the United States, New Delhi can now forget about that announcement. The Trump administration has doubled down on pressing India to buy more defence equipment from the United States, in order to reduce its trade deficit. Its commerce secretary, Howard Lutnick, laughed at concerns raised at the India Today Conclave about his country's reliability as a defence supplier. "India needs to stop listening to silly people," he said, dismissing Britain, France and Russia as India's defence partners.

While addressing the media at the White House with Modi, Trump said that India should buy the very expensive F-35 fighter jets, as part of a larger defence package worth "billions of dollars." India has tried to wriggle out of the offer, arguing that it has not initiated any such process, but the Trump administration remembers that it took seven years for the Modi government to sign a deal for MQ-9B Predator drones, which it had successfully negotiated during the two men's first terms. During his 2020 visit to India, Trump effectively forced India to announce the acquisition of Apache and Seahawk helicopters by threatening to make the announcement himself at Ahmedabad and by making the success of his trip contingent on the deal being confirmed.

Trump is in an even greater hurry this time, and the Modi government has no cards to play. It could not even protest when the United States reinforced its commitment to provide funds for Pakistan's F-16 fleet despite stopping most other foreign funding. Trump also praised Pakistan for its counterterrorism cooperation in his State of the Union address, as New Delhi watched meekly. He is angling for a deal with the Chinese president, Xi Jinping, which would leave India in a very precarious situation—one of its own making, due to a wasted decade under Modi.

With China and Pakistan rapidly modernising their air forces, India's ability to upgrade its capabilities has become a strategic imperative, without which the country will be left vulnerable. While there is a critical shortfall of fighter jets, the situation is almost as desperate in the cases of critical force multipliers, such as airborne early warning and control systems, aerial refuelling tankers, electronic warfare platforms and drones, as well as advanced intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance assets essential for extending operational reach and maintaining air superiority.

Meanwhile, the comptroller and auditor general has revealed a growing shortage of IAF pilots, which had increased from 486 in February 2015 to almost six hundred by the end of 2021. The IAF aimed to recruit 222 pilots annually but fell short by anywhere between twenty and seventy trainees every year between 2016 and 2021. This shortage is expected to persist in the future.

The lack of sufficient hardened aircraft shelters and blast pens leaves critical IAF assets vulnerable to enemy strikes, especially in the border regions of Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh. The storage and handling of advanced weaponry and ammunition is another vulnerability, as precision-guided munitions, long-range missiles and advanced electronic warfare suites require specialised storage and maintenance infrastructure, which the IAF lacks.

Modi's Agniveer scheme, under which three quarters of the contracted personnel are demobilised after four years, is particularly detrimental for a technology-intensive force such as the IAF, where extensive training is required to handle sophisticated systems. This short tenure not only hampers the development of fully combat-ready personnel but also creates operational handicaps, as the IAF requires longer training periods to ensure they are proficient in handling complex equipment and systems. The IAF was totally opposed to the scheme, which was forced down its throat. Unless swift and decisive action is taken by the political leadership, its impact will be visible on the IAF's operational readiness in the next few years.

In 2019, Modi announced plans to restructure the military by integrating the army, navy and air force under unified theatre commands within five years. This has the potential to undermine the IAF's role as a strategic force. It has consistently expressed reservations about dividing its limited assets among theatre commands, as this could fragment its resources and compromise its ability to execute independent air campaigns. Theaterisation, as currently envisaged by a military leadership dominated by the army, would limit the IAF's flexibility and effectiveness in responding to diverse threats, thereby weakening India's overall defence posture.

The air chief marshal has played his part by repeatedly highlighting the crisis the IAF faces. If the Modi government is intent on continuing its politics of strategic neglect, these warnings would also fail to spur the urgent action needed to address the critical shortages in fighter jets and the lagging modernisation efforts. The consequences of continued inaction would be severe, leaving India vulnerable to threats from foes and strategic pressure from allies. Ukraine should serve as a cautionary tale for what happens when one side in a conflict cannot achieve air superiority, as does India's own experience in the Balakot episode. Modi must act decisively—anything less would be a betrayal of India's long-term security and strategic interests. ■

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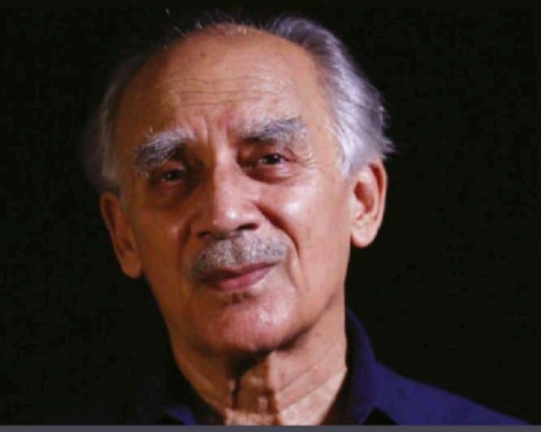
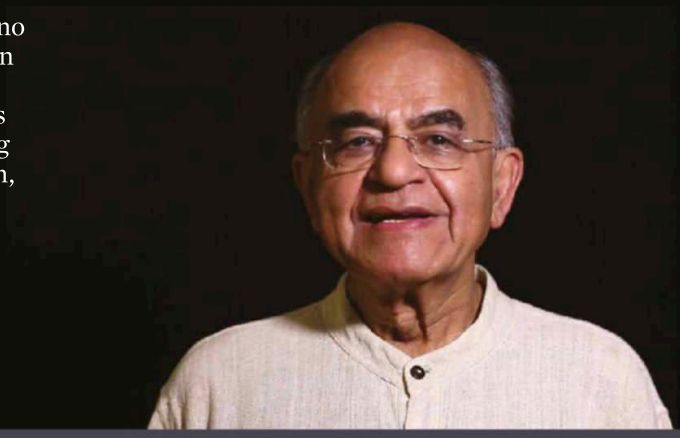


Democracy just cannot survive without a free press. And certainly, a country like India, which is so diverse, can absolutely not survive without a free expression of facts and views. And because the mainstream media is now shutting its mouth, out of greed or out of fear, the role of magazines like Caravan becomes all-important. It is very important that all of us should subscribe to magazines like Caravan, so that they get an independent source of funds and can continue to be doing completely independent and fearless work.

ARUN SHOURIE, Journalist and Politician

My favourite literary genre is long nonfiction, and no one does a better job of it than Caravan magazine in India. I recall that the very best review that I read about my book *The Difficulty of Being Good* came as a very thoughtful, analytical, independent-thinking article on it. And that's really the tenure of Caravan, so go and read Caravan magazine.

GURCHARAN DAS, Author and Former CEO, Procter & Gamble



I've been a reader of The Caravan for several years, and I think it's in a position which is very, very important, because it provides nuanced, detailed stories of issues that are really going to impact the future of India. I think it's one of the very rare publications now that seem quite fearless in their approach, which is why I respect what it's doing, and recommend that more readers join in and share the work that Caravan is doing.

SHUBHA MUDGAL, Hindustani Classical Vocalist

Muddy Waters

Ritual inclusion at the Kumbh does not wash away Modi's contempt for Dalit rights / **Caste**

/ **SAGAR**

Prime Minister Narendra Modi described the Kumbh Mela as a "grand Mahayajna of Unity" that "has strengthened India's national consciousness" for thousands of years—a blatantly exclusionary statement, given that the ritual involves only Hindus. Like the deity Krishna revealing the universe in his mouth, he wrote in a 27 February blog post, the Kumbh allowed people to witness "the massive potential of India's collective strength," which would have been "a great force" in the aftermath of Independence had it "been correctly recognised and harnessed towards boosting the welfare of all." Three months earlier, he had called it an occasion where caste differences "dissolve, sectarian conflicts fade, and millions unite with a single purpose and shared belief."

The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party distributed copies of the Constitution to the fifteen thousand sanitation workers at the two-month event, while the Uttar Pradesh government, which spent ₹7,500 crore on the mela, set up temporary primary schools for their children. A few hours after Modi's blog post, the chief minister, Adityanath, and members of his cabinet drove home the message by dining with sanitation workers. Several commentators interpreted these activities as the BJP's attempt to win back the Dalit vote it had lost in the 2024 general election, but this outreach was not new. At the last Ardh-Kumbh in Prayagraj, months before the 2019 election, Modi had washed the feet of five sanitation workers and glorified their menial jobs as the work of *tapasvis* (ascetics) and *karmayogis* (providers of selfless service). However, Modi's efforts at Dalit inclusion have been restricted to the ritual realm.

At the first Round Table Conference, in November 1930, BR Ambedkar put forth eight "terms and conditions" before Dalits would "consent to place themselves under a majority rule in a self-governing India." These conditions did not include the right to participate in Hindu rituals. Instead, Ambedkar asked for equal citizenship, the free enjoyment of equal rights, protection against discrimination, redress against prejudicial action or neglect of interests, a government department dedicated to dealing with their problems, and adequate representation in legislatures, cabinets and the bureaucracy. For Dalits to be fully part of the national consciousness the Kumbh supposedly strengthens, they must first be full participants in the nation state. However, when it comes to providing representation in government and addressing workplace discrimination, the Modi government has not just failed on every account but viewed Dalit rights with contempt.

In December 2024, the parliamentary standing committee on the welfare of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes submitted a report that illustrates this outlook. The report

For Dalits to be fully part of the national consciousness the Kumbh supposedly strengthens, they must be full participants in the nation state.

BELOW: Narendra Modi and Adityanath greet pilgrims at the 2025 Kumbh Mela.

SANJAY KANOJIA / NURPHOTO / GETTY IMAGES

was about the union government's response to 13 recommendations the committee had made, in July 2023, after finding serious lapses on the part of the department of personnel and training—which Modi heads, with Jitendra Singh as his deputy—in formulating, implementing and monitoring reservations. The DoPT accepted only five recommendations and rejected six others, while not responding to the remaining two.

The most pressing issue affecting SC and ST inclusion in the government workforce is the rise in informal employment. The standing committee drew attention to this trend, noting that various state-owned

enterprises were "outsourcing some specific non-core works to contractors and that reservation for SC/ST are not being implemented in these organisations." Since such contract workers were ultimately being paid out of the state exchequer, the committee expressed the "firm view" that the DoPT should insist on contractors reserving jobs for SCs and STs. It reminded the DoPT of its own rule—based on a 1968 order issued by the home ministry—mandating reservations for all government employment longer than 45 days and asked the department to put in place "a stringent monitoring mechanism" and to "ensure minimum wages, safety, health benefits and security to all contractual and outsourced workers."

The DoPT rejected the standing committee's concerns about contractualisation, which it defended by citing rules issued by the finance ministry, in 2017, that allow government departments to engage private consultants and suppliers. "The personnel engaged in such

The committee was "astounded to observe" that many liaison officers lacked basic information and were unable to respond to "simple queries."

services," it said, "are the employees of the contractors or firms who provide such services and are the employees of the private sector." The committee had asked whether these rules violate Articles 16 and 335 of the Constitution—providing for the right to equal opportunity and for reservations in public employment, respectively—but the department did not provide an answer. Instead, it noted that, according to a coordination committee set up by the Manmohan Singh government in 2006, "the best course for achieving progress on the issue of affirmative action is through voluntary action by the industry itself." It added that the government was "implementing various schemes for the welfare of labourers," without specifying how many contract workers had benefited from those schemes.

The five sanitation workers whose feet Modi had washed in 2019 were contractual employees. Three of them returned to work at the Kumbh this year. They told *The Print* that there had been little improvement in their living and working conditions, and that they had been struggling to avail of government schemes, such as the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana. Their primary demands were regular salary hikes and permanent employment. The standing committee had found that the representation of SCs and STs in Grade A posts—which have the highest pay scale in government jobs—was 13.2 percent and 5.51 percent, respectively, which is below the constitutionally mandated 15 percent and 7.5 percent. The representation was 17 percent and 6.9 percent in Grades B and C, but the only category where SCs had higher representation than their share of the population was sanitation workers, nearly two-fifths of whom are Dalit.

"Occurrence and filling of vacancies is a continuous process," the DoPT replied, adding that it had instructed ten departments, which account for ninety percent of government employees, to constitute in-house committees to identify and study backlogs, and to appoint liaison officers "to ensure due compliance of the orders and instructions pertaining to reservation." In other words, government departments that fail to implement reservations are accountable only to themselves, with no regulatory oversight. The committee had recommended that the government should set up a "separate regulatory authority under DoPT to ensure meaningful and full implementation of the reservation policies and orders till legislation to this effect is enacted by the Government."

As for the liaison officers, the committee was "astounded to observe" that many of them lacked basic information about how their departments were implementing reservations and were unable to respond to "simple queries." It had recommended that liaison officers not be assigned other work and that their independence should be ensured by having their performance reviews written only by "the highest authority," so that they did not face repercussions for censuring their superiors in the department. The DoPT ignored these recommendations, instead highlighting the seniority of the officers—who must at least hold the rank of deputy secretary—and claiming that it regularly organises workshops and training courses on the subject.

The standing committee had recommended that the DoPT constitute a team to conduct

random checks on department rosters—documents that record the category to which each individual post has been allocated in order to meet the requisite quotas. However, the government responded that, since all departments are considered equal, the DoPT "has no power of superintendence over other Ministries to monitor the implementation of reservation policy." The committee did not accept this "self-satisfied stance," arguing that, as the nodal ministry for hiring by government departments, the DoPT "should devise a mechanism at their end to enable it to monitor and to ensure implementation of reservation roster."

SC and ST representation in promotions for Grade A over the past five years was also far lower than the mandated 15 percent and 7.5 percent, respectively, while records had not even been kept for Grades C and D. The DoPT repeated its lines about the liaison officers and appointments being a continuous process.

The least diversity, the standing committee noted, can be found in the boards of directors in state-owned enterprises. It objected to the government's "routine reply" that there were not enough suitable candidates, since "highly qualified deserving and meritorious candidates among SCs/STs are available," and recommended that the department formulate policy to ensure representation in these bodies. The DoPT responded that there was no government policy requiring reservations in the names recommended for directorship by the Public Enterprises Selection Board—a "complacent stance" that did not satisfy the committee, which insisted upon a new policy mandating reservations in board appointments.

The higher echelons of the bureaucracy were in a similarly "dismal" state, with the standing committee finding that, between 2017 and 2022, out of the around four hundred government officials on or above the rank of joint secretary, the number of SCs and STs had increased only from 35 to 41. The DoPT responded that reservations in promotions apply only up to the lowermost rung of Grade A and that secretary-level posts are filled on a "deputation basis," with state governments making available "officials possessing requisite experience," which means that "representation of SC/ST officers in these posts depends on the willingness and relieving of the officers belonging to such communities by the respective cadres." It did not address the committee's recommendation that this system of deputation should be replaced with a process of empanelment that ensures the representation of SCs and STs.

Modi's attempts to integrate Dalits and Adivasis into the Hindu union are accompanied by his government's persistent refusal to allow its SC and ST employees to unionise. This is based on a 1993 order issued by the DoPT—headed by PV Narasimha Rao at the time—that prohibited employee organisations meant "to represent the interests, or on the basis, of any caste, tribe or religious denomination or of any group within or section of such caste, tribe or religious denomination." The standing committee argued that this did not preclude the creation of SC and ST welfare associations, since various Supreme Court judgments had "defined SC/ST as a class, not caste which represents thousands of castes and tribes." The DoPT, however, insisted that categorisation "has to be with reference to commonality of interest and functioning of the association as a homogenous group with reference to function of posts and not with reference to any caste or group of caste like SC/ST employees. Therefore, SC/ST cannot be taken as distinct category for the purpose of service association. They may have common caste interests but cannot have common service interests in totality."

Over the seventeen months between the two reports, however, the government changed its tune. In its December 2024 meeting with the government, the DoPT said that it was working in consultation with the ministry of social justice and empowerment to formulate a response to two recommendations, which would be communicated separately. Besides recognising SC/ST welfare associations, these asked the department to "stringently monitor and assess" the grievances of SC and ST employees—including discrimination during promotions, exclusion from the Modified Assured Career Progression scheme, delayed raises and violations of reservation policies—that the DoPT had claimed was being "taken care of" by individual departments.

These grievances, and the government's failure to fulfil the constitutional mandate to integrate the bureaucracy, contribute to Dalits being systematically excluded from the state apparatus. It is a violation of the promise of equal citizenship, for which a few platitudes at the Kumbh Mela cannot compensate. ■

Masters of Spin

How the Modi government conducts information warfare / **Media**

/ **PUJA SEN**

The Tamil magazine *Ananda Vikatan*'s digital version, *Vikatan Plus*, published a cartoon depicting Prime Minister Narendra Modi in handcuffs, sitting next to a laughing Donald Trump, on 10 February. Five days later, *Vikatan* employees suddenly found their website blocked, via a confidential order issued by the ministry of information and broadcasting. The magazine was not even made aware of the MIB directive until the next day, when it received the order.

The illustration referenced the mass deportation of Indians under the US president's anti-immigration crackdown, during which over a hundred Indians were forcibly put on an aircraft, their hands and legs chained for nearly forty hours, with limited access to food and restrooms. The official MIB notice stated that the *Vikatan* website had been taken down on "emergency orders," under Section 69A of the Information Technology Act, which allows the government to remove online content on grounds such as the "interest of sovereignty and integrity of India, defence of India, security of the State, friendly relations with foreign States or public order or for preventing incitement." K Annamalai, the Tamil Nadu president of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, had filed the complaint to the MIB, claiming that the news portal had published "offensive and baseless content" about Modi. This is all it takes today to take down a piece of content in Modi's India: a notion of aggrieved sentiment.

In 2023, the government had used the same IT Act against the BBC Documentary *India: The Modi Question*, which looked at how Modi handled the 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom when he was chief minister of Gujarat. The documentary never aired in India, but many clips were shared widely online, several of which the

PHOTOGRAPH BY SAJID WAJID SHAIKH

government banned, claiming that the documentary was a "propaganda piece designed to push a particular discredited narrative." Last year, *The Caravan*, too, received a notice to take down its investigation into the torture and murder of civilians by the Indian Army in Poonch, Jammu and Kashmir. No specific details of the complainant or the complaint, beyond sweeping generalisations, were given. Not a single factual inaccuracy in the article was pointed out. After a perfunctory inter-departmental committee meeting where it was clear that the members' minds were already made up, the MIB sent an order asking for the article to be taken down that evening—stating that non-compliance would result in the entire website being taken down.

Section 69A, then, allows the government immediate censorship powers over individuals and platforms, with no need for arbitration by the court and no substantive opportunity to defend one's case. It is testimony to just how radically the information economy has changed in Modi's India. Most people now understand that, in mainstream media outlets, news is actively suppressed or spun in favour of the government. On television, our attention is continuously redirected and overwhelmed by frivolous issues, and legacy English media has weakened its own standards while trying to avoid government scrutiny. Although social media and the internet are still spaces where information can flow somewhat organically, the government has been casting a wide regulatory net to also bring it under its surveillance and control.

The Modi government uses various policies and regulations at its disposal under the garb of combating misinformation. In most cases, it uses the language of protection—against injured sentiment; against insult to the nation, leader or "family values"; against danger to public order, sovereignty, and friendly relations with other countries; against vulgarity, obscenity and so on. These terms, by definition, are notoriously vague and open to interpretation, but they effectively marshal an idea of public morality in Modi's India: conservative, anti-intellectual and conspiracist, and also humourless. The government behaves as if it is acting on behalf of its citizens, to give us the best information, but it is tightening its leash on public discourse and loosening our grip on reality.

It does these things by giving teeth to various laws, existing and proposed. The Telecommunication Act, 2023, which expands the definition of telecommunications to internet-based and over-the-top services, such as WhatsApp, Signal and Telegram, now gives the government broad powers to breach privacy by intercepting messages on your phone during a "public emergency" and in the interest of "safety." From April next year, the Income Tax Act will enable authorities will be able to break into your emails, bank accounts, social media accounts, if they have reason to believe you possess undisclosed income or property. The Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023, as the activists Aruna Roy and Nikhil Dey have pointed out, renders toothless a key principle of the Right to Information Act, which allowed the ordinary citizen to demand transparency from public officials. The wording of the rules is so ambiguous that a journalist or anyone creating content that deals with another person's information is prosecutable.

The political will to manipulate the flow of information comes amid a broader erosion of democratic institutions, including the judiciary, making it increasingly difficult for citizens to discern truth from propaganda and allowing the government to shield itself from accountability. This situation is not peculiar to India. Misinformation, disinformation and virality are a decisive part of our world, and authoritarians structurally use them to sustain power. From Putin's Russia to Duterte's Philippines to Trump's United States and Modi's India, information warfare has become an important feature of politics across the world. A report in 2025 by V-Dem found that over seventy percent of the world's population lives in autocracies, signifying a global trend of countries in democratic decline. India, which was downgraded to an "electoral autocracy" in 2018, is now counted among the top ten "worst autocrizers" in the world.

In this post-truth era, big technology companies, primed to expand their reach and profitability, do little to stem hate, anger and fear—all emotions that achieve virality faster than sober, dispassionate accounts—on their platforms. Governments around the world are able to exploit the information ecosystem to their advantage by confusing fact and fiction, and by propelling domestic politics into narrative wars.

Public attention has never been more scattered and easily distracted. "The very form of social media scrambles time, place, proportion: terror attacks sit next to cat videos; the latest jokes surface next to old family photos," the journalist Peter Pomerantsev writes in *This is Not Propaganda: Adventures in the War Against Reality*, his 2019 book on the weaponisation of information in modern politics. "And the result is a sort of flattening, as if past and present are losing their relative perspective." This distortion entrenches an upside-down world, where trivial and serious things are presented with equal intensity. Those who manufacture outrage gain influence, and those who try to call out wrongdoing are punished by the state.

The Modi government has manipulated this chaos to its advantage, banning content at its discretion, while permitting the spread of misinformation when politically expedient. From the Delhi violence

and COVID-19 mismanagement to conflicts with neighbouring countries and the ongoing civil war in Manipur, the strategic use of disinformation shapes public perception and justifies the government's various actions and failures.

On the same day as the *Vikatan* censorship, there was mayhem at the New Delhi railway station—18 people died in a stampede for a train headed to the Kumbh Mela, and several more were injured. The Kumbh itself had seen a stampede a few weeks earlier, with at least thirty dead. As news and videos of the deaths and injuries from Delhi spread on social media, the news agency ANI posted an outright lie, calling it only a "stampede-like situation." (ANI, repeatedly called out by fact-checking organisations for spreading false news, acts as the government mouthpiece, as demonstrated in a 2019 cover story in this magazine.) The lieutenant governor of Delhi posted a tweet calling the incident a "rumour," and the railway minister also downplayed what had happened. Several newspaper headlines the next day did not specify the death toll, and barely any television channels—not that this is any longer surprising—sent their reporters to investigate the matter. Later, the union railways ministry ordered X, under the IT Act, to take down 285 video posts of the incident showing the chaos and casualties in the national capital. Even as it was censoring satire, the government was actively suppressing news being reported on social media.

A 2023 report by Twitter found that, over the previous year, the Indian government was among the top four countries sending legal requests to the platform to take down content, and also one of the top countries seeking user data. Things are so out of hand now that the company has taken the Indian government to court for setting up "an impermissible parallel mechanism" that causes "unrestrained censorship of information in India."

Going forward, journalists will find themselves even more constrained when reporting on the government and its institutions in a country rapidly falling on the press freedom index. The IT rules were amended in 2021 to allow the government to censor or modify news online. It mandated the setting up of a government-appointed fact-checking unit whose official purpose would be to identify "fake or false or misleading" information in "respect of any business of the Central Government." In 2024, the Bombay High Court—responding to petitions filed by the comedian Kunal Kamra and the Editors Guild of India—struck this provision down, stating that it violated Articles 14 and 19 of the Constitution. In March this year, the union government appealed to the Supreme Court, arguing that the fact check unit is to apply only to "intentional misinformation" and that it "does not cover criticism, satire, commentary, or other forms of expression."

But it is pretty clear that the government has poor tolerance for almost any form of criticism—whether through news or other modes of expression—and is excessively thin-skinned when it comes to depictions of Modi in particular. The right to an opinion or a point of view is enshrined in Article 19, which guarantees freedom of speech and expression within reasonable restrictions. The *Vikatan* cartoon, in the tradition of good political satire, drew attention symbolically to two things: the indifference of those in power and the humiliation of those on the other end. Thanks to the Streisand effect, the cartoon has now been viewed far more than it would have, had it not been censored. However, the intent of censoring is clear: to have a chilling effect on outlets, cartoonists and reporters who dare to criticise the prime minister or the government. There are those individuals and organisations that will continue to stand up to this intimidation. But there are many more who will likely fall silent or self-censor, afraid of the risks of speaking up.

As for those who stoop to take the Modi incentive and resort to sycophancy, it does not guarantee any protection either. This was the case with the influencer Ranveer Allahbadia, who received massive backlash following his appearance on *India's Got Latent*, a comedy variety show created and hosted by Samay Raina. Allahbadia made an off-colour joke about parents and sex while hazing a contestant. Though crude, his remarks were not out of place in Raina's show, where guest judges engaged in a free-for-all of ridicule and mockery, taking potshots at contestants and each other. A great moral panic was whipped up around Allahbadia's joke, which was framed primarily as an offence to supposed "Indian family-values." The controversy erupted around the same time as the US deportation of Indians, the stampedes in Delhi and the Kumbh, and the Sensex falling, but this was what dominated headlines and television channels for days.

Both Allahbadia and Raina command millions of viewers across their digital platforms. Allahbadia, who has a reputation as a government-friendly creator, frequently platformed right-wing politicians and figures, allowing them to peddle propaganda unchecked while he nodded along like an earnest schoolboy. Raina, by contrast, more provocative and quicker witted, built his brand on what he has called "edgy" humour—consisting mostly of sexual innuendos and casual misogyny, delivered in the laidback ribbing style of a popular schoolyard bully. Neither can be accused of taking a principled stance on political or social matters of the day or speaking truth to power, but Modi's censorship regime came down hard on them.

The particular episode was blocked on YouTube under the direction of the government. Modi's sycophantic anchors on television news took the opportunity to array themselves against Allahbadia, Raina and other popular influencers—who do not have to pretend to be journalists and to whom politicians have been flocking, since it gets them more eyeballs and engagement without any uncomfortable questions. Allahbadia received multiple death threats, and police complaints were lodged against them and various other people who had been part of the show. The debate in the courts and in the media was set up as one of free speech versus family values. Overwhelmed by the backlash, Raina, who was at the pinnacle of his popularity before the controversy, took down all his content from YouTube and cancelled his shows. The Supreme Court granted Allahbadia relief from arrest but not without acting like the supreme loco parentis—it rapped him on the knuckles, referring to him as "dirty" and "perverted," and allowed him to continue his show "subject to maintaining morality and decency." It further asked the union government to frame "regulatory measures" that adhered to "known moral standards" of Indian society.

The known moral standards in Indian society are unfortunately dispiriting. These are violently casteist, hypocritical, deferential to authority and pious about the Hindu undivided family. This ecosystem, further entrenched under Modi, has already given us the banality of Allahbadia and what passes for subversion in the substandard humour of Raina's *Latent*. More worryingly, the controversy is being used as an opportunity to push through the controversial Broadcasting Service (Regulation) Bill, which will hand the government another arrow in its arsenal over the internet. The government was forced to withdraw one version of the bill last year amid pushback from lawyers and activists for infringement on privacy and worries about surveillance.

Controversies like this limit the mainstream range of expression, but nothing seems to limit the expressive range of our rulers. A report by the US-based research group India Hate Lab, also published in February amid all these controversies, found that hate speech targeting Muslims had increased by 74 percent in India. Among the top offenders were Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah.

No sooner had the Raina–Allahbadia controversy died down that another one emerged, this time centred on Kamra, who has actually stood up to the government and the courts in the interest of freedom of expression. On 23 March, he released a video of a stand-up act in which he took digs at Maharashtra's chief minister, Devendra Fadnavis, his deputy Eknath Shinde, Modi and various other political figures. Shiv Sena workers, who claimed to be offended by Kamra's jokes about Shinde, attacked the venue where the video was shot, and destroyed it. Fadnavis declared that the "urban Naxals" and "left liberals" supporting such shows would be taught a lesson. "Freedom of speech is there," Shinde said. "We understand satire. But there should be a limit. This is like taking *supari*"—contract—"to speak against someone." This is an old trick in the book: to construe an agenda on the part of someone who says something the establishment does not like.

The government behaves as if it is acting on behalf of its citizens, to give us the best information, but it is tightening its leash on public discourse and loosening our grip on reality.

"In a world where even the most authoritarian regimes struggle to impose censorship, one has to surround audiences with so much cynicism about anybody's motives, persuade them that behind every seemingly benign motivation is a nefarious, if impossible-to-prove, plot, that they lose faith in the possibility of an alternative," Pomerantsev argues. Such an environment degrades collective life—the marginalised are made more vulnerable, and the silent majority are made more grotesque by their complicity as they witness the decay. Luckily, Kamra has demonstrated courage. "As far as I know, it is not against the law to poke fun at our leaders and the circus that is our political system," he responded in a statement posted on social media. "I don't fear this mob & I will not be hiding under my bed, waiting for this to die down." ■

Wild Dreams

Modi's cheetah project is falling apart

COVER STORY / ENVIRONMENT

AKHILESH PANDEY

RONY SEN

{ONE}

ON THE NIGHT OF 16 MARCH, a nine-year-old boy was playing in the courtyard of his home in Umarikala village, in Madhya Pradesh. His mother, Suraksha Dhakad, was feeding the cattle nearby and completing last-minute chores. Suddenly, she heard her son shrieking. She rushed to the courtyard to witness a horrific sight: a wild animal was mauling her son. In a panic, she lunged forward, grabbed her son's hand, and tried to pull him away. But the animal's jaws were locked. "It felt as if fifty men were pulling him from the other side," she would later recount to journalists. "I used all my strength." The child survived, but with deep wounds on his face, head and shoulder.

Suraksha and her husband, Hakim, identified the animal as a cheetah, describing its distinct black facial markings. The authorities refused to acknowledge this. Uttam Sharma, the chief conservator of forests at Kuno National Park, dismissed their claim, insisting it was a leopard. Just four kilometres from the village, Kuno is one of the sites of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's grand vanity project: Project Cheetah. The scheme, announced to great fanfare in 2022, involved introducing African cheetahs to India.

"There has never been a recorded cheetah attack on a human anywhere in the world," Sharma told the media, asserting that "India's cheetahs are no different." But Hakim and other villagers in the area had never heard of a leopard attack in the area. Cheetahs, Hakim told me, "have been spotted at least fifteen–twenty times." Gus Mills, a South African carnivore expert, agreed that a cheetah was the more likely culprit, explaining that while cheetahs are not known to attack humans in the wild, those raised in captivity—such as the ones in Kuno—exhibit different behaviours, particularly towards small

PREVIOUS SPREAD: Locals near a roadside signboard of Kuno National Park in Madhya Pradesh, on 8 August 2022.

BELOW: Suraksha and Hakim Dhakad's 9-year-old son being treated for injuries on his face, head and shoulder. Suraksha said the animal she saved him from was a cheetah. While government officials denied this, Hakim said that cheetahs had been spotted "at least fifteen–twenty times" near their village.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Stills from a video, shot on 24 March 2025, show a crowd watching cheetahs on the outskirts of Behardha village, near Kuno National Park's northern boundary. According to a wildlife expert who saw the video, the cheetahs looked hungry and showed "clear signs of physiological and behavioural stress."

children. "There are a few cases of them doing so in the captive situation and small children are often the subject of much interest to captive cheetahs," Mills told me. When I asked Sharma if there was video footage or other proof to back the official claim that the big cat was not a cheetah, he simply stated, "when I say it is not cheetah, it is not cheetah."

The Indian government currently has 26 African cheetahs, many of whom have been straying out of the area earmarked for them. A recent video, shared a week after the Dhakads' ordeal, shows a crowd watching the cheetah Jwala and her four 14-month-old cubs on the outskirts of Behardha village, near the park's northern boundary. Villagers throw sticks and stones at the cheetahs, and yell to distract them from the cattle they are trying to kill. A monitoring team of the state forest department was present on the spot but failed to stop any of the events captured on camera.

The cheetah project has been plagued by scientific and logistical failures from the outset. Reports have exposed a lack of expertise, irregularities in implementation and the government's refusal to acknowledge its mistakes—even as cheetahs die in captivity and communities near Kuno suffer the fallout. International experts have raised concerns over India's lack of space and prey for the species, while experts and officials within the Modi government who once backed the project have since been sidelined. Two and half years on, three foreign experts associated with the project are no longer actively involved. MK Ranjitsinh, one of India's foremost wildlife bureaucrats and chairperson of a committee appointed by the Supreme Court to oversee the experimental introduction of African cheetahs, told me that the project "has become more an exercise in political propaganda than a scientific conservation endeavour."

I visited Kuno National Park to find out about the cheetahs under the government's care. The difficulty of accessing the site, the officials involved or even accurate information about the cheetahs' health, all confirmed the widespread allegations of a lack of transparency. Several wildlife experts, conservationists and bureaucrats told me that nearly every aspect of the project is under question, from its management and vision—laid down in the Cheetah Action Plan released in January 2022—to the suitability of Kuno as a habitat for cheetahs. Fifteen cheetahs, including seven cubs, have died so far, with the most recent deaths occurring in Novemer 2024, when two cubs died merely two days after birth. In some instances, cubs have died due to starvation and dehydration. Mean-

Local communities, most of them belonging to Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes, have been grappling with the conservation project and its ruinous effects.

PUBLIC DOMAIN

PUBLIC DOMAIN

while, local communities, most of them belonging to Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes, have been grappling with the conservation project and its ruinous effects. People I spoke to in the area were at pains to make sense of the government's approach.

The Modi government is doubling down. Plans are underway to expand the project to Gujarat's Banni grasslands and Madhya Pradesh's Gandhisagar Wildlife Sanctuary, without consulting affected communities. Worse, two people formerly associated with Project Cheetah told me that the government is in talks to hand over the management of Banni to Vantara, a private wildlife facility owned by Reliance which already holds over ninety African cheetahs in captivity. This is not conservation. It is a spectacle—one that is proving disastrous for both, cheetahs and the people forced to live alongside them.

{TWO}

THE SMALLEST OF THE BIG CATS, cheetahs are known to be shy, cautious animals who usually prey upon small- and medium-sized herbivores, and are, in turn, occasionally preyed upon by bigger carnivores. During the colonial era, Asiatic cheetahs were among many species that fell to the guns of British officials, bounty hunters and South Asian princes. The princes regularly employed local Adivasis in their domains to trap cheetahs for domestication or for use in hunting other species. By the 1930s and 1940s, when the hunting of big cats began to be restricted somewhat earnestly, the cheetah population in the subcontinent was already much depleted.

In his book *India's Wildlife History*, Mahesh Rangarajan writes that the expansion of human settlements and the conversion of grasslands into agricultural fields shrank cheetah habitats and caused a rapid decline in its most common prey, the blackbuck. Around the time of Independence, cheetahs were spotted only in a few forested stretches in present-day Chhattisgarh, Bihar and Jharkhand. By the early 1950s, conservationists and bureaucrats were proclaiming the Asiatic cheetah extinct in India.

During the early 1970s, in the background of India's massive, internationally-funded tiger conservation project, India's princes-turned-conservationists pleaded with the union government to bring back the Asiatic cheetah. This would be done by bringing a small population from Iran, which was, by then, their only remaining habitat in the world. Under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, the union environment ministry approached the Iranian government, who asked India to send a small population of Asiatic lions in exchange. The political tumults of the Emergency and the Iranian Revolution put paid to the plan. As of March this year, there were reportedly fewer than twenty Asiatic cheetahs in Iran—too few to move some to another country without destabilising the lives and breeding patterns of the entire population.

To understand why some conservationists and bureaucrats in the forest department continue to insist on the introduction of cheetahs in India, I spoke to Yadvendradev Vikramsinh Jhala, who was the lead scientist on Project Cheetah for well over a decade and had been among the first to moot the idea. The Modi government fired him in February 2023. The introduction of cheetahs to India, Jhala told me, was meant "to bring attention to restoring open ecosystems—grasslands, deciduous and thorny forests—just like what the tiger has done for forested ecosystems."

Before Kuno was designated a suitable habitat for African cheetahs, in the 1990s, it had been chosen as the

second home of Asiatic lions from Gujarat's Gir forests. By 1998, the Digvijay Singh government in Madhya Pradesh had begun preparing the park for their arrival, evicting over a thousand families. However, after Modi took over as chief minister of Gujarat, his government refused to part with the lions. "Politicians in Gujarat started associating the lions with the pride of Gujarat," a retired forest official from Madhya Pradesh, who was privy to the negotiations between the two state governments, told me, on the condition of anonymity. Political considerations continue to override ecological needs to this day. As Jhala put it, "It is next to impossible to shift lions from Gujarat to any other state."

The stubborn decision to hold all of India's Asiatic lions within the confines of one state defies scientific sense. "During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the number of lions in Gir was reportedly around twenty," Ravi Chellam, a wildlife biologist who has been involved with the conservation of Asiatic lions since 1985, told me. "Their population has experienced a genetic bottleneck, having descended from this small founder population, and the current lion population is highly inbred. In simpler terms, Gir forest has become an isolated island for lions." In such a situation, the retired forest official said, "there is a very high risk of extinction. Inbreeding and lions dying due to diseases, especially canine distemper, are now well established facts." According to figures submitted to the Gujarat state legislature, more than three hundred lions died of various causes in 2019–20. For scientists like Chellam, the translocation of Asiatic lions is a much higher conservation priority than the introduction of African cheetahs. But, after Modi's refusal, other big cats began to be considered for Kuno, which already had a sizeable population of leopards.

In 2009, the Wildlife Trust of India, chaired by Ranjitsinh at the time, convened conservationists, scientists and officials from the environment ministry and its technical arm, the Wildlife Institute of India, as well as from the National Tiger Conservation Authority and the state governments of Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh, in Bikaner's Gajner Palace. The agenda focussed on introducing African cheetahs to India. By 2010, Ranjitsinh and Jhala, who was at the WII at the time, had surveyed ten potential sites, identifying Kuno as the most suitable location. The Manmohan Singh government approved the plan.

On 15 April 2013, the Supreme Court halted the project in response to public-interest litigation seeking the relocation of lions instead. The

ABHISHEK VIDYARTHY SINGH FOR THE CARAVAN

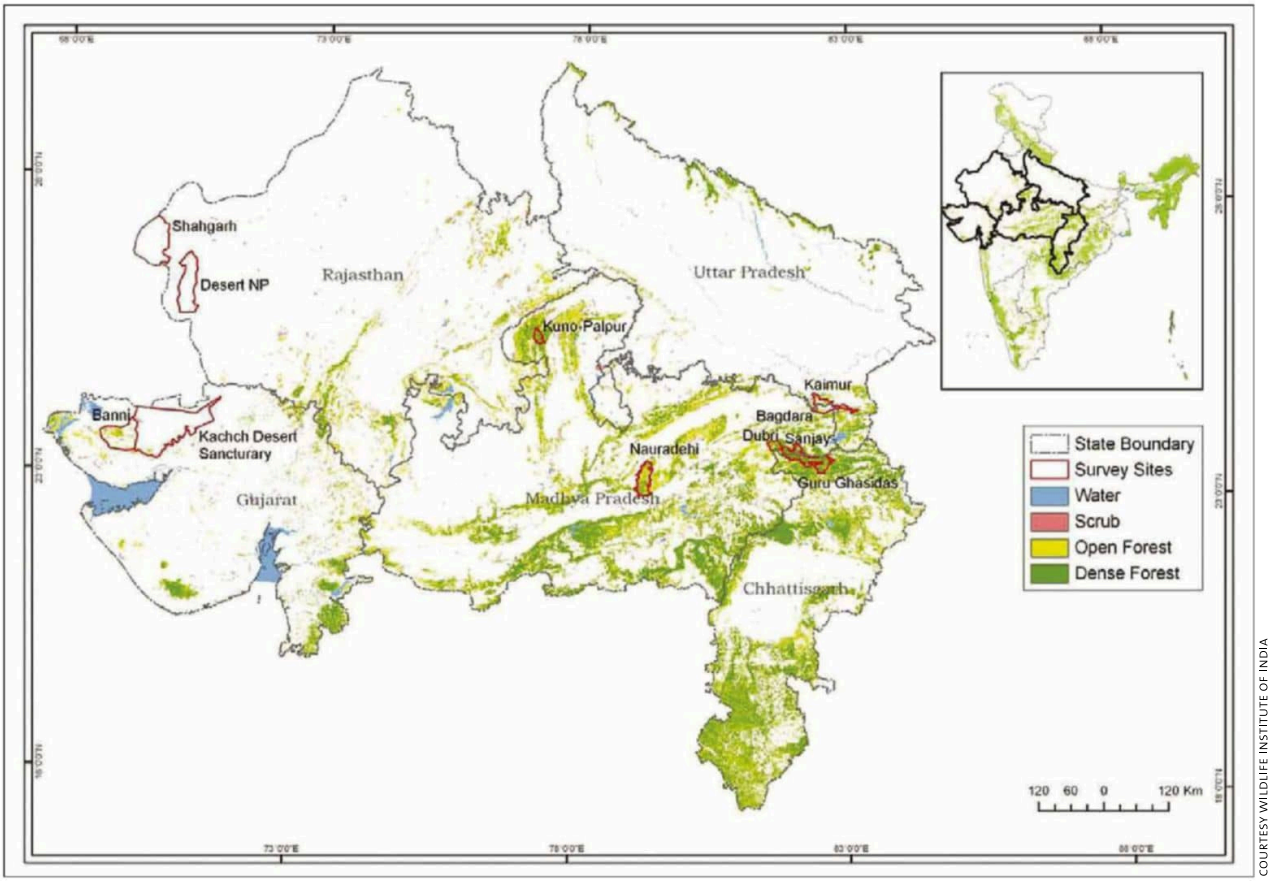
court mandated the lion translocation take place within six months and ruled that the environment ministry's plan to introduce African cheetahs in Kuno was illegal and arbitrary. Jhala told me that, after this judgment, the government formed an expert committee, including himself, Chellam and others, to oversee the transfer of lions. "However," he said, "the expert committee has not met for over the past five-and-a-half years, and Gujarat has not accepted the action plan prepared by the committee."

In 2016, during Modi's first term as prime minister, the National Tiger Conservation Authority appealed the 2013 ruling. On 28 January 2020, a bench headed by the chief justice, SA Bobde, permitted the experimental introduction of African cheetahs at suitable sites. The court stipulated that this process should not be left solely to the NTCA but should "be guided and directed" by an expert committee. The committee was tasked with surveying potential locations, evaluating the viability of large-scale cheetah introduction and supervising the entire process.

OPPOSITE PAGE: MK Ranjitsinh, the chairperson of a Supreme Court-appointed committee to oversee the cheetah introduction, photographed at his home in New Delhi, on 16 March 2025.

BELOW: By 2010, Ranjitsinh and Jhala, who was at the WII at the time, had surveyed ten potential sites for the introduction of African cheetahs, identifying Kuno as the most suitable location. Experts have since criticised the choice of Kuno due to its lack of adequate space, prey density and suitable vegetation.

MK Ranjitsinh told me that the cheetah project "has become more an exercise in political propaganda than a scientific conservation endeavour."



COURTESY WILDLIFE INSTITUTE OF INDIA

The retired forest official from Madhya Pradesh said that "the African cheetahs were brought to Kuno only to distract attention from the reintroduction of Asiatic lions." Media reports have also revealed that substantial funds were diverted, under political compulsions, from other conservation programmes to Project Cheetah. The National Wildlife Action Plan 2017–31 fails to mention any plans to introduce African cheetahs altogether, let alone how such a project might be funded or executed. On 7 January 2022, the government announced that Kuno would, indeed, be the first location to host African cheetahs in India. In addition to the NTCA, the project is run by the Madhya Pradesh forest department, under the union environment ministry.

THE FIRST BATCH of eight African cheetahs was flown on a special Boeing airplane, with the face of a tiger painted on its nose. They arrived at Gwalior airport from Namibia on 17 September 2022, Modi's seventy-second birthday. Amid the deferential presence of officials and ministers from the union and state governments, Modi—dressed up as a wildlife enthusiast, with a camera to boot—rotated a lever to release the cheetahs, one by one, from their small crates into fenced enclosures within Kuno National Park. The state-owned All India Radio provided live commentary. Later, Modi addressed a large gathering of villagers in Sheopur district, where the park is located. He announced that the cheetahs were "our great guests," and told the audience to clap for them.

Less than a week after the cheetahs arrived, the government established a task force to implement the project. A member of the task force told me, on the condition of anonymity, that it included other bureaucrats and some journalists, but neither Jhala nor Ranjitsinh. "There was not a single person—including me—in the task force who was aware about the biology, behaviour and management of cheetahs," they said. "I can't understand why there is any issue in accepting the fact that we only have experience with managing species like tiger, leopard and lion and have no experience with cheetah. What limited knowledge we have is from reading books." Jhala's sidelining from the project and his removal as the dean of the WII were, the task-force member added, reflective of "the extent of politicisation of this project."

In February 2023, the Modi government brought 12 cheetahs from South Africa to Kuno, bringing the number to 20. Over the next six months, nine cheetahs, including three cubs born in captivity, died due to heart failure, renal failure, infections caused by maggot infestation under their radio collars, and infighting. The cracks were beginning to show.

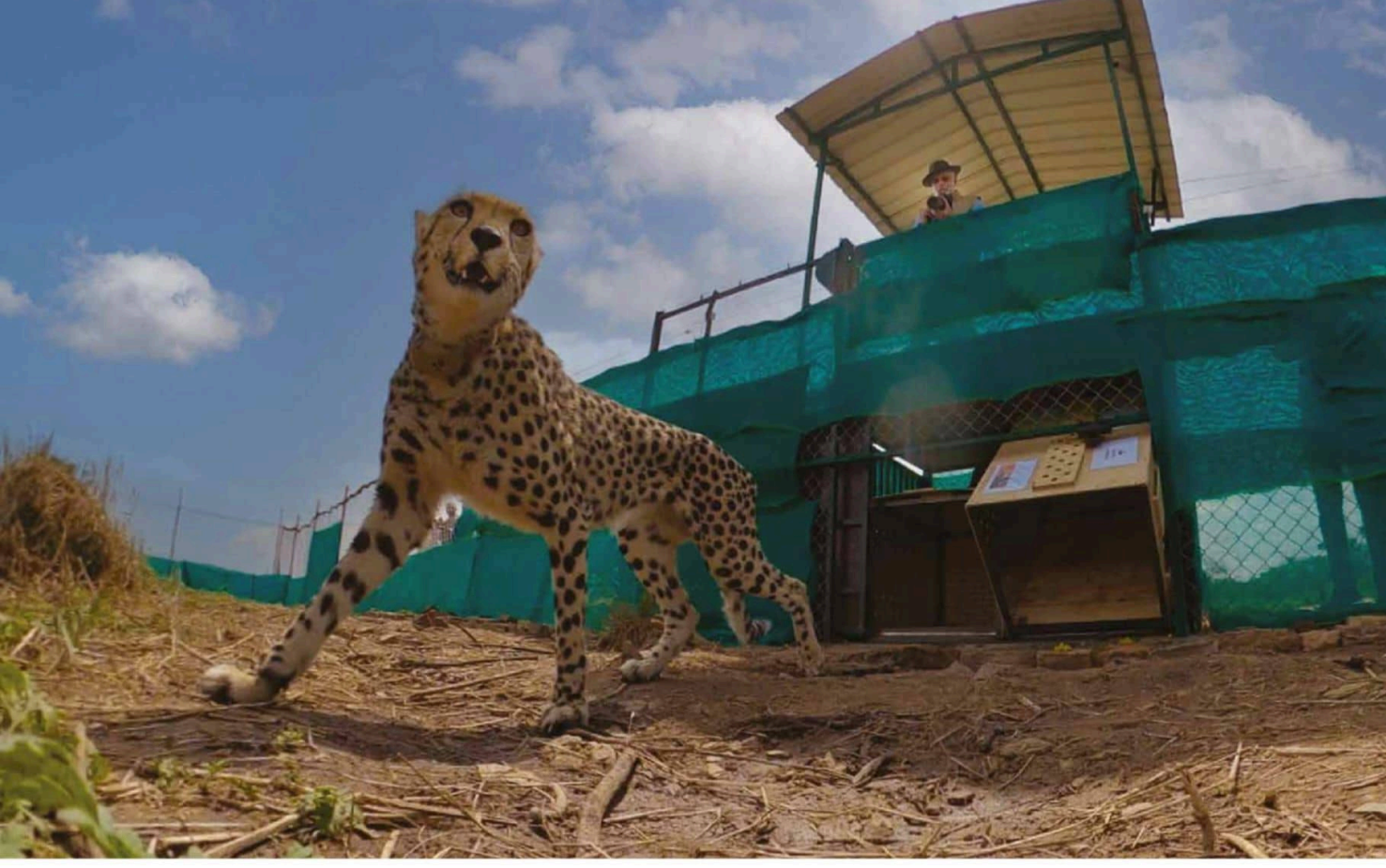
A 2024 report by the People's Archive of Rural India revealed that Jasbir Singh Chauhan, the chief wildlife warden of Madhya Pradesh when both batches of cheetahs arrived in Kuno, had written several letters to SP Yadav, the NTCA's member secretary, requesting him to "take appropriate decisions keeping in mind requirements of the species." He never received a reply, and was relieved from his post in July 2023. By May 2023, in violation of the Supreme Court's order, the Modi government had sidelined the Ranjitsinh committee in favour of a new expert committee. Like the one set up by the state government, which it also made redundant, this steering committee is staffed by senior bureaucrats—but no cheetah experts, according to Ranjitsinh.

Jwala, the cheetah spotted with her four cubs outside the park last month, is one of the original eight who arrived from Namibia. She and her cubs were released into the wild in February this year. They were all hungry and showed "clear signs of physiological and behavioural stress," Dr Peter Caldwell, a wildlife veterinarian from South Africa who saw the videos, told me. "It is evident that all individuals are in a severely compromised body condition, consistent with marked undernourishment."

"This project was very negatively affected by political influence and interference," one of the African experts formerly associated with the project told me. "Professor Jhala was removed from the project at a very critical time, without much explanation, and foreign experts were effectively cut out. If a project like this is going to succeed, it is critical that all decisions are based on sound science and on open and honest communication."

The African experts' misgivings about the government's openness are not new. I accessed two letters addressed to the Supreme Court—one by Laurie Marker and another by Adrian Tordiffe, Andy Frazer and Mike Toft, both written on 15 July 2023—that highlighted mismanagement and the need for immediate expert attention at Kuno. All four were involved during the first year of the cheetah project. Marker's letter informed the court of the importance of veterinary care and the need for cheetah-specific expertise. Both letters highlighted the urgent need to release the cheetahs from captivity to at least one additional site. They

"The African cheetahs were brought to Kuno only to distract attention from the reintroduction of Asiatic lions," a retired forest official from Madhya Pradesh said.



COURTESY KUNO NATIONAL PARK

stated that the Indian staff lacked the required expertise for effectively managing the cheetahs. Marker's letter suggested that the Mukandra Hills tiger reserve is most suitable and ready to host the cheetahs, while adding that the conservation team should not wait for the Gandhisagar site to be readied. The cheetahs could be released there later, once Gandhisagar was ready to host them. Tordiffe and the other two veterinarians' letter, stated that, ever since Jhala's removal, the African experts' involvement had "been minimised," and very little information related to the project was being conveyed to them. "It seems we have become mere window dressing for the project."

These letters were sent weeks after a government press release announced the NTCA's constitution of a Cheetah Project Steering Committee to replace the previous Cheetah Task Force. The steering committee would operate for a period of two years, and was to be chaired by Rajesh Gopal, the secretary general of Global Tiger Forum, an inter-governmental international body that operates out of New Delhi. The release also mentioned that the steering committee would be assisted by a consulting panel of international experts "for advice as and when required." The panel included Tordiffe and Frazer, veterinary wildlife specialists from South Africa; Marker, who works with the Namibian NGO Cheetah Conservation Fund; and Vincent van der Merwe, a cheetah expert and the founder of The Metapopulation Initiative, a private breeding and conservation organisation in South Africa.

The four experts were unable to attend most meetings of the steering committee, or engage with its work. Tordiffe's letter to the Supreme Court mentions that he emailed a request to be allowed to attend a meeting online, but his request was ignored. Unusually, *The Hindu* reported that, the day the steering committee was announced, experts from Vantara visited Kuno, on the NTCA's invitation, to "review health monitoring protocols" and provide recommendations after three cheetahs died in just over a month. This was despite the availability of wildlife experts from the NTCA, the WII, South Africa and Namibia, in addition to the four experts on the steering committee's consulting panel. The four-member Vantara delegation included the director of Greens Zoological Rescue and Rehabilitation Centre, its private facility for veterinary care, indicating

ABOVE: On his birthday in 2022, Prime Minister Narendra Modi released eight African cheetahs in Kuno National Park. Less than a year later, nine of Kuno's cheetahs would be dead.

INTRODUCING CHEETAHS IN INDIA: A TIMELINE

01

1970s

Under PM Indira Gandhi, MoEF approaches Iran to request Asiatic cheetahs for reintroduction; plan falls through

02

1995

WII recommends translocation of Asiatic lions from Gir National Park, Gujarat to Palpur–Kuno wildlife sanctuary, Madhya Pradesh

05

2009

MK Ranjitsinh-led Wildlife Trust of India and WII host meeting with bureaucrats and international experts on introducing African cheetahs to India, at Gajner Palace, Rajasthan

06

May 2012

Supreme Court stays MoEF's decision, under the UPA government, to import African cheetahs from Namibia to Kuno

07

April 2013

Supreme Court orders lions to be brought to Kuno within 6 months, terms plans to introduce the African cheetah illegal and arbitrary

10

January 2020

Supreme Court allows experimental introduction of African cheetahs at suitable sites in India, to be overseen by a committee chaired by Ranjitsinh

11

January 2022

MoEF announces Project Cheetah to introduce 50 African cheetahs over five years, starting with Kuno National Park

15

February 2023

YV Jhala, India's foremost cheetah expert, removed as dean of WII

16

26 May 2023

Modi government forms Cheetah Project Steering Committee, assisted by a consulting panel of four international experts

19

November–December 2024

Two cubs die days after birth in captivity; adult cheetahs Agni and Vayu released in wild

20

February–March 2025

15 cheetahs released into the wild, of whom five escape Kuno; child attacked in Sheopur

ILLUSTRATION BY TUSHAR AGARWAL

03

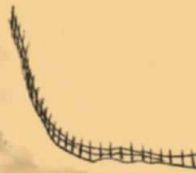
1998

Madhya Pradesh starts preparing Kuno's landscape to receive Asiatic lions

04

1998–2003

24 villages with 1,600 families, mostly from the Scheduled Tribes, displaced from Kuno and relocated to sanctuary's outskirts



08

2016

NTCA appeals 2013 order, states that Kuno, two other sites were found suitable for African cheetahs and seeks permission to survey other sites

09

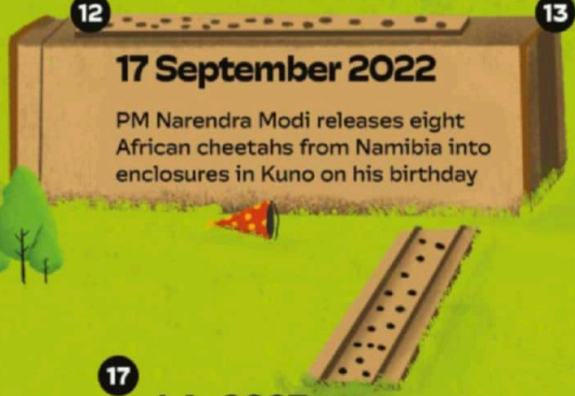
October 2018

Supreme Court-appointed Central Empowered Committee advises against introducing African cheetahs due to lack of required habitat or prey density in India

12

17 September 2022

PM Narendra Modi releases eight African cheetahs from Namibia into enclosures in Kuno on his birthday



13

September 2022

MoEF sets up task force for project implementation, faces opposition; eventually made redundant

14

February 2023

12 African cheetahs from South Africa released into enclosures in Kuno

17

July 2023

JS Chauhan removed from the post of chief wildlife warden, Madhya Pradesh, after writing to NTCA on management of Kuno

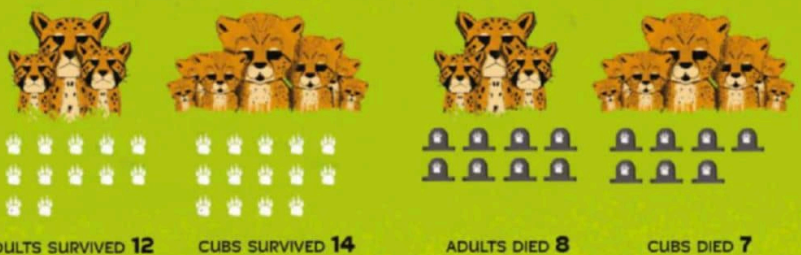
18

15 July 2023

African experts write two letters to Supreme Court on the mismanagement of Project Cheetah

21

Current Status



ADULTS SURVIVED **12** CUBS SURVIVED **14** ADULTS DIED **8** CUBS DIED **7**

that the Reliance entity's involvement was very much official. Yet, neither Project Cheetah's annual report nor the monitoring committee's minutes mention any support sought from GZRRC.

"Most of the current steering committee members are unknown to us and they seem to show little interest in our opinions," Tordiffe and the other veterinarians stated in their letter. Marker's recent response to my email was curter: "The project is in the hands of the Government of India." She is no longer associated with the project. By the time I contacted the other experts, it had been more than eighteen months since the consulting panel was formed. Tordiffe had already left to work at Vantara. Vincent van der Merwe, who had expressed unhappiness at the bureaucratic challenges facing the project and said that he had attended only a few meetings at the very beginning, died a few weeks after our interview.

"The project is not progressing in the proper direction due to a lack of basic expertise," Ranjitsinh said, when we met at his home in Delhi. The trajectory of the project was being determined by the egos of a few men and political concerns at the top, to the detriment of the cats' health. "The government is worried about losing cheetah that wander out of Kuno," he explained. "Cheetah confined in captivity will lose muscle and condition as, like racehorses, they need to run regularly to remain in shape." Since early December 2024, 17 of the 26 surviving cheetahs have been released from their enclosures in Kuno National Park, some after well over a year in captivity. On the other hand, Ranjitsinh added, "the deaths of the cubs in captivity raises doubts about their management, lack of adequate veterinary care and the lack of experience and expertise."

Political egos reign so totally that, according to multiple Indian officials involved in the project who spoke to me on condition of anonymity, even the matter of who gets to release information publicly is carefully controlled. The government's secrecy about the much hyped project has only fuelled further concerns about mismanagement and legal violations. News about the project—when it does trickle out—continues to generate curiosity and sharp reactions from people across the country.

The lack of transparency is even more glaring when it comes to the outlay of funds for Project Cheetah. Independent estimates suggest it could be millions of dollars.

Ajay Dubey, an activist pushing for greater transparency and accountability in India's wildlife and environment sectors, emphasised that, while mistakes were inevitable in the cheetahs' introduction, wildlife norms are being compromised. He founded Prayatna, an environmental action group in Madhya Pradesh, and has been active on these issues for over two decades. Like many others I spoke to, he invoked the 2013 Supreme Court order that the Modi government has failed to comply with. "The project is under great political influence, and the experts who had to be in the field are busy in fulfilling the orders of people who seem to be more interested in building their image in front of the prime minister," he said.

Dubey brought up an incident in November 2024, when the mutilated remains of newly born cheetah cubs were found in an enclosure in Kuno. "They are yet to clearly state what happened," he said. "First they said there were four cubs, and then they informed it was only two cubs. They said the bodies were found mutilated, and also said that it was done by the mother. If there are cameras everywhere and the animals are in relatively small enclosures, then why are things so unclear and uncertain? When the cheetahs die, the management authorities reveal very few details and the post-mortem reports are delayed and seldom shared. This lack of transparency suggests that the authorities are under tremendous pressure and very scared."

The lack of transparency is even more glaring when it comes to the outlay of funds for Project Cheetah. Independent estimates suggest it could be millions of dollars. In December 2022, the union government told parliament that the project was being allocated ₹68.17 crore from Project Tiger and the Compensatory Afforestation Fund Management and Planning Authority—the body to oversee projects for restoration of forests that have been diverted for industrial and other purposes. "For the longest time, there have been demands that [CAMPA] money should be given to Gram Sabhas so that they can be financially empowered to restore forests," the researcher and activist Neema Pathak-Broome told the magazine *Down to Earth*. "Enormous sums of money and resources are being wasted on the cheetahs," Chellam, the wildlife biologist, told me. "This obsession with African cheetahs," he added, was distracting much-needed attention from long-standing national conservation priorities. By July 2023, the government's revised estimate for the first five years of the project had risen to ₹91.65 crore.

"The NTCA is insensitive and careless about the irregularities in the cheetah project," Dubey said. He wrote to authorities several times regarding irregularities in the project, and also filed several right-to-information requests for details about its

COURTESY KUNO NATIONAL PARK

implementation and progress. In July 2024, Dubey's RTI request for correspondence records of Project Cheetah was denied by the Madhya Pradesh forest department under Section 8(1)(a) of the Right to Information Act. This clause allows a public authority to withhold information if its disclosure may harm the sovereignty and integrity of India, or its security, strategic, scientific, or economic interests, or its relations with a foreign country, or lead to the incitement of an offence.

{THREE}

FROM THE OUTSET, experts began to question the decision to make Kuno the site for the initial release of cheetahs. In October 2018, the Supreme Court-appointed Central Empowered Committee advised against the introduction of African cheetahs in India. Among the various reasons it gave was that India does not have the required habitat and prey density to support cheetahs. It raised the concern that bringing in cheetahs would "result in serious man-animal conflict with disastrous consequences."

"Kuno is a typical dry deciduous forest which was never managed to bring this cat," Faiyaz Khudsar, a biologist who has studied Kuno for several years, told me. "Instead, it was managed as the second home for the Asiatic lions. Therefore, the evacuated farmlands were never managed as grasslands." According to Khudsar, the state forest department's initial management practices were "very scientific," with the aim of hosting a couple of lion prides. Initially, wild jujube and edible small- and medium-sized grasses were established. These grasses supported populations of chinkara antelope, chital deer and wild pigs—prey species preferred by big cats. Khudsar added that, after a few years, with no sign of the lion translocation, Kuno became dormant. Further experiments in managing the plant life of the area and converting its abandoned farmland into grassland stopped. Slowly, these lands were occupied by taller grass and woody species, with other ecological changes occurring in tandem. As a result, the grassland habitat has changed into woodland. The Cheetah Action Plan, too, concedes that Kuno requires heavy maintenance and culling of invasive plant species.

Experts also say that, at 748 square kilometres, the area of the national park is inadequate for establishing a free-ranging population of

ABOVE: Prime Minister Narendra Modi poses for a photograph with South African cheetah experts Vincent van der Merwe (second from left) and Adrian Tordiffe (second from right), and Namibia-based expert Laurie Marker (fourth from right) at Kuno. The three experts are no longer associated with the programme.

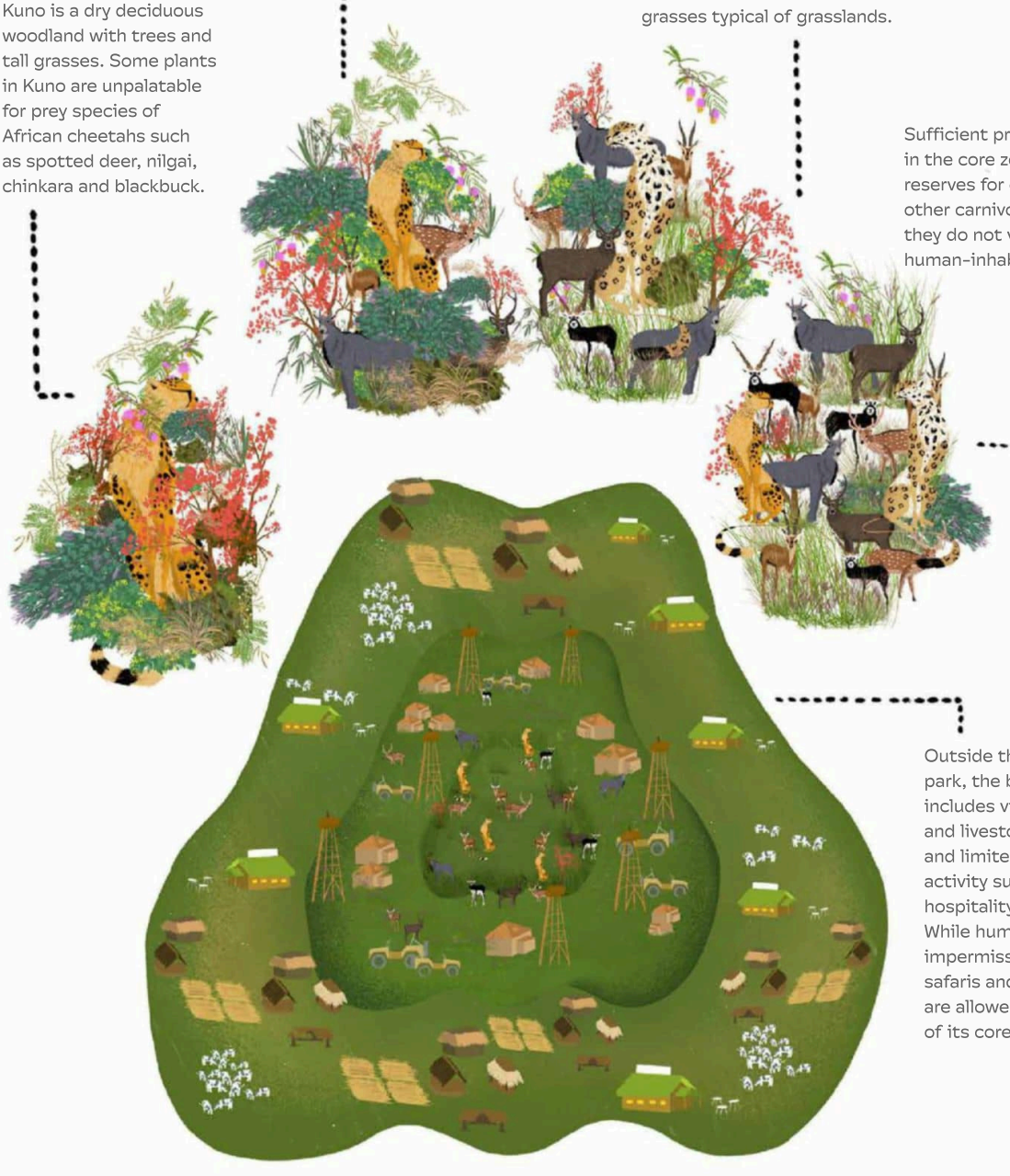
A QUICK GUIDE TO CHEETAH HABITAT

The size of cheetah territories is linked to their communication systems, survival strategies and prey density. Kuno lacks enough prey or space for all its cheetahs.

To add to the cheetah's woes, they have to compete with leopards for the sparse prey, who thrive on small and medium grasses typical of grasslands.

Kuno is a dry deciduous woodland with trees and tall grasses. Some plants in Kuno are unpalatable for prey species of African cheetahs such as spotted deer, nilgai, chinkara and blackbuck.

Sufficient prey is necessary in the core zones of wildlife reserves for cheetahs and other carnivores, so that they do not venture into human-inhabited areas.



Outside the national park, the buffer zone includes villages, fields and livestock, schools and limited commercial activity such as retail, hospitality and tourism. While human habitation is impermissible in the park, safaris and tourist activity are allowed in some parts of its core zone.

ILLUSTRATION BY TUSHAR AGARWAL

cheetahs. According to Bettina Wachter, an evolutionary ecologist who is working with the Cheetah Research Project in Namibia, Kuno is too small for cheetahs, even if a buffer zone were to be added. She emphasised that cheetahs generally occur at low densities throughout a landscape. In areas with abundant prey, a cheetah's territory may be relatively small, amounting to about fifty square kilometres. But in areas where prey is sparse, one cheetah's territory may be as large as four hundred square kilometres, roughly two-thirds the size of Mumbai. In addition, females and non-territorial males have huge home ranges—areas that are not defended as territory but where the cheetahs may still roam and hunt—up to several thousand square kilometres.

The most important detail, however, is that cheetahs' territories are usually not contiguous to each other—they are distributed across large swathes with a distance of over twenty kilometres separating one territory from another. This is based on their communication system, involving scents and other markers of territory. Females and non-territorial males visit several such territories, thus roaming over very large areas.

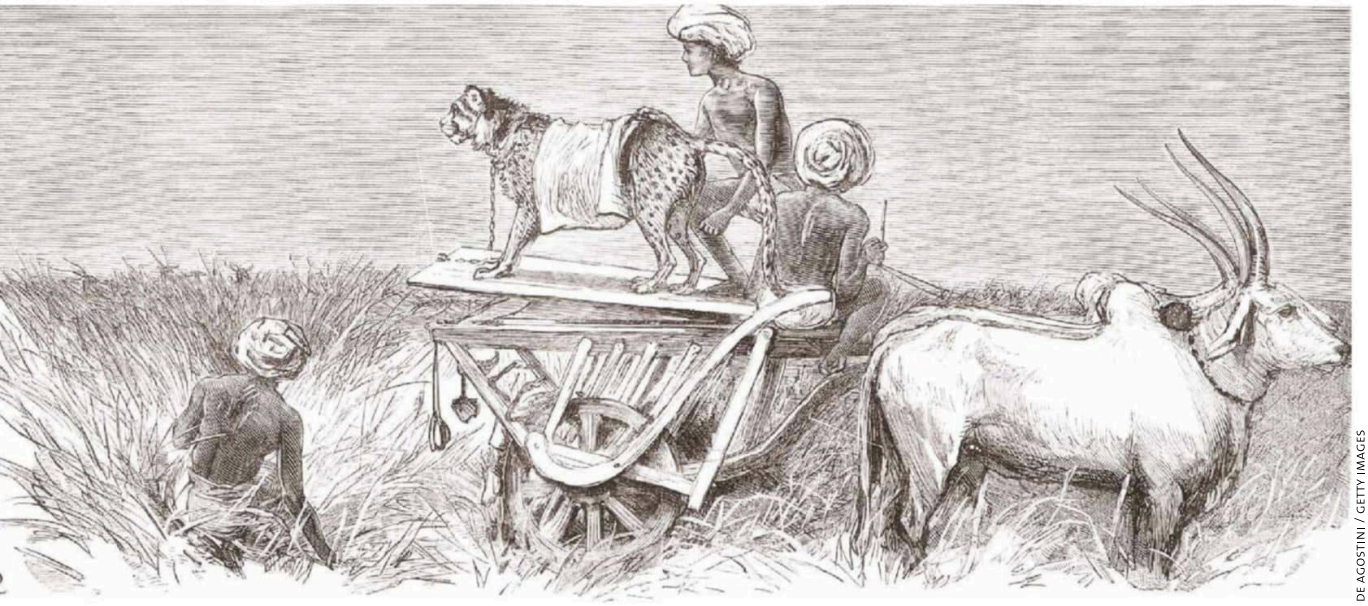
While the WII had certified Kuno as having an adequate prey base for lions, in 2013, the prey population appears to have depleted severely in subsequent years. For instance, the density of the most abundant cheetah prey species, the spotted deer, plummeted from 69 per square kilometre in 2013 to 23 per square kilometre in 2021—by 2024, it had declined further to just 17.5 per square kilometre. "Depleted prey base is a huge challenge for the project," Chellam said, "KNP was an incorrect choice, as it is too small and also not fully prepared."

In an attempted quick fix, a large number of herbivores, such as spotted deer, nilgai and blackbuck, were captured from other wildlife reserves and protected areas, such as the Kanha and Pench tiger reserves and Bandhavgarh National Park—without apparent regard for the impact on these areas' ecosystems—and brought to Kuno. Additionally, the government is now breeding prey species in captivity in Kuno, with plans to do the same in Gandhisagar. To further reduce competition for prey, Gandhisagar's management recently moved out at least seventeen leopards from the sanctuary, of which three have died after translocation. "I think it is very unlikely that cheetahs change their social system with increasing food and move closer together," Wachter said. "Rather, they keep their distance from each other, as is typical for the species. Currently, there is no reason to assume that African cheetahs brought to India have a different spatial distribution than in Africa. Thus, it is unlikely that the cheetahs will stay within Kuno, which is unfenced, because they need space."

Wachter added that "there are villages with farmers and livestock adjacent to Kuno, thus the cheetahs will come into contact with them when exploring the area and trying to set up territories for a communication hub." The government's action plan for cheetah conservation in Gandhisagar looks at the Kuno–Gandhisagar landscape as one giant stretch covering roughly nine thousand square kilometres, including parts of Madhya Pradesh's Neemuch and Mandsaur districts, and, in Rajasthan, the Bhainsrodgarh wildlife sanctuary, the Mukundara Hills tiger reserve, and the cities of Kota and Chittorgarh. Even with such an expansion of the protected area, "they are all too small for a free-ranging population and the areas in between are inhabited by people and their livestock." The outcomes of such encounters may not always result in livestock being preyed on, but, if last month's cheetah sightings are anything to go by, local communities who have already lost much to the government's conservation programmes may find themselves vulnerable to attacks.

"There is no reason to assume that African cheetahs brought to India have a different spatial distribution than in Africa. Thus, it is unlikely that the cheetahs will stay within Kuno," Wachter said, "because they need space."

When Project Cheetah was launched, it initially excluded Gujarat. However, in July 2024, the Central Zoo Authority unexpectedly approved a captive-breeding centre for African



DE AGOSTINI / GETTY IMAGES

cheetahs in the Banni grasslands. The Modi government allocated ₹20 crore for its fencing and development. Experts I spoke to cautioned that, while Banni is ecologically viable, it lacks sufficient prey, requiring significant investment in restoration.

The decision has alarmed the Maldhari pastoralist community, whose open-grazing system—sustaining over a hundred thousand livestock—could be severely disrupted. The community, nearly ninety percent of whose members are Muslim, includes groups designated as Scheduled Tribes, Scheduled Castes, or Socially and Educationally Backward Classes. The Maldharis have been fighting a lengthy legal battle to continue exercising their centuries-old rights to access and maintain the grassland. Nearly fifty gram sabhas across Banni had submitted claims for collective rights to various resources in the grasslands under the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, but these claims have not been recognised by the Gujarat government.

In 2021, the National Green Tribunal passed an order stating that the rights of Maldharis have been secured in the forest rights act. In the aftermath of the order, the union ministry of tribal affairs has twice issued directions to Gujarat to issue the titles, but the state government has not complied. Ramesh Bhati, a social worker who has been active in Banni, told me that the government had designated it as a Project Cheetah site without engaging locals or seeking consent from their gram sabhas and panchayats—a legal requirement. For them, Kuno is a cautionary tale.

PRIOR TO the lion translocation project, over five thousand people resided in Kuno wildlife sanctuary—it was converted into a national park only in 2018—according to a 2003 paper by Asmita Kabra, a social scientist who has studied displacement, poverty and livelihood security around the park. A majority of these inhabitants belonged to the Sahariya community, a Scheduled Tribe whose members have historically relied almost completely on forests for their survival. The Sahariya are also categorised by the government as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group, entitling the community to additional state support and legal protections in order to continue their traditional way of life.

Kabra told me that, while the relocation of sixteen hundred families from 24 villages inside Kuno had been carried out sensitively, displacement had caused financial, cultural and emotional losses. The villagers were moved from fertile forests, where they had not just lived and farmed but also collected forest produce, to rocky and infertile land. Many displaced families even abandoned their cattle, which were used to grazing in the forest, as the relocation areas lacked enough water and fodder. The resettlement may even have worsened the social and political marginalisation of Dalits and Adivasis in the area.

More than two decades on, the families who were displaced from Kuno and resettled in other areas remain deprived of basic civic amenities. When Project Cheetah commenced, they, like other locals in the vicinity of the park, were told that tourism, especially safaris, would improve their financial situation. The Cheetah Action Plan states that the government will undertake rural development including road-building,

The forest department depends on the local people for habitat management, prey capture and cheetah tracking, Kabra said, "but their role is never acknowledged, and they live under the threat of further displacement."

OPPOSITE PAGE:
An illustration from *The Graphic* magazine, published on 21 October 1882, depicts the use of cheetahs for hunting blackbuck in Baroda. During the colonial era, Asiatic cheetahs were hunted by British officials and South Asian princes, who employed local Adivasis to trap cheetahs for domestication or for use in hunting other species.

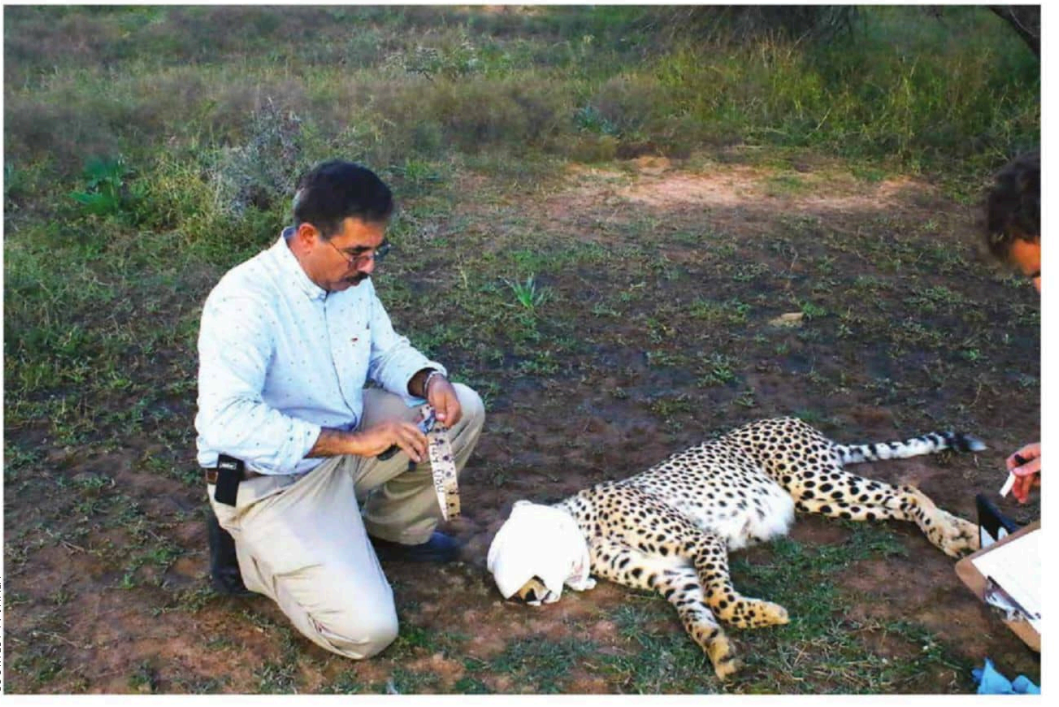
RIGHT:
Yadvendradev Vikramsinh Jhala, India's foremost cheetah expert, was fired by the Modi government in February 2023. Here, he is seen capturing and collaring a cheetah in South Africa.

structural aid for employment and education, and the provision of irrigation, drinking water, medical facilities, sanitation and solar street lighting. The families are desperately looking forward to the day when such visions begin to turn into reality, but with the majority of the cheetahs having been confined to enclosures until recently, the locals have not experienced any positive economic outcomes from tourism activities.

While making an overt assumption that 30 percent of the cheetahs' diet would be small livestock, the CAP also outlines that local farmers would be "educated" and "guided" to adapt their agricultural practices and diets—which include the regular consumption of bush meat by a significant percentage—and would be compensated for livestock killed by the cats as well as crop losses caused by prey species.

The state forest department has recruited volunteers, called Cheetah Mitras—friends of the cheetah—from the local communities to assist in monitoring and implementation of the project. In and around the national park, there was total silence about the project, be it officials or the Cheetah Mitras or the cheetah trackers. When I met members of the displaced communities, including a few Cheetah Mitras, they all had stories to share, but most were hesitant to allow me to mention their names.

Kedar Adivasi, now 33 years old, was a child when his family was displaced, along with other Sahariyas of Ahirwani village, from Kuno in 2000. Alongside a two-acre plot, Kedar's family was allotted a smaller patch of land and ₹35,000 in cash to build a house. When I spoke to him in January this year, Kedar told me that the situation fell far short of what had been promised. "Not all the families were given land for agriculture," he said. "Around thirty-five families still don't have land." He said that the government's continued breach of promises has left the entire village in a state of crisis. "Our lands there, in Kuno, were fertile—near the river. Besides, we used to access resources and products from the forest which are not available to us. But the government moved us to a rocky patch. They had to give wells in all the lands but they gave only nine. How will we survive?"



COURTESY YV JHALA

COURTESY AJAY DUBEY

Residents of the 24 villages within Kuno first began hearing about an impending eviction in 1998, when the wildlife sanctuary was about to be turned into a national park. The forest rights act—which mandates that the informed consent of traditional forest-dwelling and forest-dependent communities is a prerequisite for any project that results in their dispossession—did not exist at the time, and though the Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act was passed in 1996, the Madhya Pradesh government had not yet implemented it.

Compensation followed the Beneficiary Oriented Scheme for Tribal Development—which considers every male above the age of 18 as a separate family, entitled to services worth ₹1 lakh each—which was introduced by the environment ministry. Those displaced from Kuno were assured by the government that their new villages would have all civic amenities, but it took over seven years for the departments of health, education and irrigation to proceed on this.

In the early stages, the listing of beneficiaries was carried out by forest guards, who were tasked with visiting each village located inside the park and collating information about all "genuine" residents. The resulting list excluded several villagers who were absent from the village during the process, especially affecting families that migrated seasonally to supplement their income.

Most crucially, however, the state revenue department did not initially recognise the new owners of the land. People from Ahirwani, Paira Jatav, Paira Adivasi and other villages are still waiting for their land and resettled villages to be granted revenue status, which would allow them to access individual and collective rights under the FRA, PESA and other laws. Many families are yet to get a *patta* or title deed for the plots that were part of the rehabilitation package. Other villages in the vicinity of the national park, such as Umri, Agara, Arrod, Chentikheda and Deori, were left to grapple with an influx of thousands of people from the two dozen displaced villages.

"Each relocated village has had problems of this nature, and we are fighting for their rights," Sultan, who has been challenging the declassification of 28 villages including his own, told me. He explained that his village, Paira—relocated in 1999—had been absorbed within the gram panchayat of Agara, which comprises members of the SC, ST and OBC communities. Without the revenue status, the residents of the Paira Jatav hamlet are unable to form a new gram panchayat for democratic decision-making and execution of local development works.

Sultan was disappointed with the forest department's treatment of people from the displaced villages. He has been a Cheetah Mitra since 2022, and was assured that he would get a chance to interact with Modi at the release of cheetahs in September 2022. He told me that his name was removed from the event list after officials learned of his plan to bring up the grievances of the displaced communities before the prime minister. "Only those who were praising the project and saying

that everything is good were invited to meet the prime minister," he told me. "This is not done. At least our genuine issues must be taken care of by the government, along with the conservation of the cheetah."

"Gradually, people have built back livelihoods," Kabra told me, but the landholdings allotted to them have proved too small. "They rely heavily on distress migration to survive. The level of food security and nutrition among children is really low. TB and malnutrition are rampant." Kabra's research shows that, since people's agricultural fields were first absorbed into the sanctuary, farm incomes have reduced sharply. Income from the sale of forest produce also disappeared. While she had heard many local Adivasis say that they do not mind the cheetah introduction, Kabra said, "they don't understand why their forest access has to be stopped for the project. It's not awareness they need, it's a real financial and cultural stake in the project's success."

Prakash Kushwaha is a 53-year-old resident of Babanpura. He was 29 when his village was displaced, in 2000. Despite being eligible, he said, he and 25 others never received land or cash compensation. "Now, the family has grown, and we have nothing. We work as labourers to earn our livelihood." The villagers have submitted several letters to the authorities, but nothing has come of these. They were still waiting on a response to their recent letter, submitted in December last year, to the department. "Whenever we meet them, they ask for papers, and we give papers," Kushwaha said. "They ask for other papers. How many papers we could give? What we have, we have given, and we are eligible for the compensation."

Kabra was certain that, for Project Cheetah to succeed, "it must involve the local people as equal stakeholders." The forest department depends on them for habitat management, prey capture, and cheetah tracking, "but their role is never acknowledged, and they live under the threat of further displacement if the park expands further. In these circumstances, how do we expect them to care whether the cheetah project succeeds or fails? Either way, they don't gain anything."

No lessons have been learnt from the disastrous experience of the last two decades. After Kuno was identified as the most suitable site for initiating Project Cheetah, the government displaced people yet again. The residents of Bagcha, a village near Sheopur, were displaced in 2022. They told me they were offered ₹15 lakh to move out—they could either take the entire amount in cash, or get land and some money to build a house. Sita Ram Garg, one of Bagcha's displaced villagers who now lives in Agara, told me that, while several people have received the rehabilitation package, many are yet to, resulting in a serious hurdle for anyone trying to settle in a new place. Neither the union nor the state government seem particularly concerned about protecting the rights or meeting the basic needs of the displaced across Sheopur. Moreover, the younger generation of

AKHILESH PANDEY FOR THE CARAVAN

OPPOSITE PAGE: Ajay Dubey wrote to authorities several times regarding irregularities in the project, and requested information on Project Cheetah's implementation and progress. In July 2024, his RTI request was denied by the Madhya Pradesh forest department out of concern that it may harm India's sovereignty and integrity, or the state's interests and foreign relations.

BELOW: Sultan Jatav has been challenging the declassification of 28 villages in and around Kuno, including his own. He has been a Cheetah Mitra since 2022, but was barred from witnessing Modi's visit to Kuno that year, after officials learned of his plan to bring up displaced villagers' issues before the prime minister.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated Vantara, Reliance's private wildlife facility in the Jamnagar oil refinery complex, on 4 March 2025. Several of Vantara's imported animals belong to species that are subject to an international trade ban. The organisation's expansion has been aided by a weakening of India's laws on wildlife trade and ownership.

the displaced communities seem to be in limbo, with many continuing to be deprived of land, housing, education and medical facilities in the resettled areas more than two decades on.

ON THEIR ARRIVAL IN KUNO, the cheetahs were initially quarantined in bomas—an African term for enclosures holding wild animals in captivity—each fifty square metres in size. Subsequently, they were moved to seven larger enclosures, ranging from 0.7 to 1.1 square kilometres. All of these enclosures were constructed at an estimated cost of ₹15 crore. The official Namibian policy states that large carnivores captured from the wild should not be held captive for more than ninety days. If they are held captive for longer than that, the carnivore should either be euthanised or remain permanently captive. This is because, as Wachter explained, "the longer a wild born cheetah stays in captivity, the more difficult it gets to adapt again to the wild, to hunt successfully and to resume their communication system." Cheetahs in prolonged captivity may also gain weight and lose muscle, with the result that they end up physically unfit for release in the wild. Under Indian conditions, there is an added layer of complexity in introducing the cheetah—a subordinate carnivore species that needs to cope with leopards or tigers in the subcontinent's existing ecosystem. "This cannot be trained in captivity," Wachter said, "thus the chances that captive-bred cheetahs survive in such an environment seem quite low."

"I think the authorities in charge of the project are very risk averse," the expert added. "Most of the decisions made are based on fear rather than on good science."

For cheetahs born in captivity with wild-born mothers, Wachter added, "this is even more difficult and for captive-born cheetahs released into the wild without a 'teacher' it will not be possible to adapt and survive in the wild." Captive breeding of wild-caught cheetahs is not allowed under Namibian law. But most of the cheetahs in Kuno have hunted and been fed, engaged in breeding, and lived and even died, within the enclosures. More than two years into the project, several of them are yet to establish their home ranges and territories in the wild. There have been several deaths in captivity, and the escape of one cheetah—later recaptured—has made officials cagey about releasing more cheetahs in the wild.

In August 2024, the only free-ranging cheetah at the time was found dead near a river. The special investigation team formed to probe his mysterious death was disbanded within hours. Some cheetahs were seen passing through human habitations and into neighbouring Rajasthan. The recaptures were not always due to concerns related to the cats' or people's safety. At least three experts and officials, who had been associated with Project Cheetah in 2023, told me that, during that year, cheetahs were brought back from near the border between Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan because the latter was not ruled by the Bharatiya Janata Party at the time.

One of the individuals who told me this, a forest official who has since retired, explained that, "whenever the cheetahs are released, they move towards Rajasthan, because you cannot stop the natural movement of the cheetah. But, in India, due to politics, the cheetahs were stopped and recaptured whenever they went towards Rajasthan." While reiterating that the point of the project is to release cheetahs in the wild, the official added, "Who will convince the senior officials involved with the project and how? People who have very limited wildlife knowledge and zero experience of managing any national park are occupying powerful positions because they are in good books of politicians like Minister Bhupendra Yadav."

In December 2024, the cheetahs Agni and Vayu were released in the wild. While exploring their habitat, the two gradually began to move towards Rajasthan, which now has a BJP government. This time, there are no plans to recapture them, though media reports and local people confirmed that both have been spotted in human-dominated habitats, and one is also reported to have killed a dog. When asked about this, Uttam Sharma, the chief conservator of forests at Kuno National Park, confirmed that both cats are now free-ranging and that there are no plans to bring them back. Sharma did not confirm their locations, even though

the released cats are microchipped and collared. He added that a survey had been initiated, to identify a larger landscape that would be developed as their habitat. As to when the landscape would be adequately prepared, "there is no deadline fixed," Sharma told me. The governments of both states have formed a joint panel for coordination related to the project. Experts, activists such as Ajay Dubey, and members of the local communities near the states' border expressed the common view that these joint efforts are being made now since there are BJP governments in both states.

INSTAGRAM / VANTARA

I SPOKE ABOUT the project's implementation with some of the African experts who had been associated with the project until the end of 2023 and had spent time in Kuno. According to one expert, who asked to remain anonymous, there had been two major deviations from the CAP: the failure to release the cheetahs into free-ranging conditions per the decided timeline, and the ongoing breeding of the cheetahs in fenced enclosures. "I think the authorities in charge of the project are very risk averse," the expert added. "Most of the decisions made are based on fear rather than on good science. Over the last two years, we have therefore learnt very little about how suitable Kuno is for cheetahs and what the primary threats are there."

According to the CAP, the criterion for the project's short-term success is a 50 percent rate of survival among the cheetahs outside captivity. "The CAP was certainly followed at the start of the project," the expert said, "but there have been several deviations over the last 18 months." Since the cheetahs had spent most of their time in Kuno in semi-captive conditions, they added, "it is impossible to judge the success or failure of the project against the criteria set out in the CAP."

On 17 March, the Modi government announced the release of a female cheetah and her four cubs into the park, claiming that this brought up the number of free-ranging cheetahs to 17. Commenting on the long-term captivity of a wide-ranging species like the cheetah, Ravi Chellam said that "confinement in a very small and restricted space for a very long time will affect their physical fitness as well as behaviour. Some of the African experts have commented, after viewing recent photos of the two released cheetahs [Agni and Vayu], that they seem to have gained excess weight."

While the international norm was to quarantine cheetahs for 30 days after moving them across international borders, Chellam said, "we did not follow this norm even in a single case. Some of the cats were quarantined for more than hundred days." He elaborated that, unless the cheetahs are freed from captivity, they will not establish a wild population—the stated objective of this project. Upon their release, he added, "Some of the cheetahs will die, and the others will survive, and that is natural. It is crucial that they are exposed to the challenges posed by climate, parasites, other predators and humans, for them to adapt and settle down."

I asked the chairperson of the steering committee, Rajesh Gopal, why the cheetahs had been kept in captivity for longer than the ninety-day limit mandated by Namibian policy. In response, he cited medical concerns, explaining that skin infections—exacerbated by the shift in climate from the southern to the northern hemisphere—required treatment. He also emphasised that India has decades of experience managing big cats and follows its own policies for handling such situations. In his email response, Gopal further claimed that things are going perfectly fine as far as the progress of Project Cheetah is concerned, with all the goals and objectives having

been achieved, and that there was no need to revisit the CAP.

The experience Gopal was referring to is based on handling tigers, leopards and lions—not cheetahs, which are very different in terms of their behaviour and ecological needs. This is conceded to by the government's own newsletter marking two years of Project Cheetah, published in October 2024, which states, "Many believe, this unfortunately includes also those who have worked extensively in the field managing Indian carnivores, that cheetah like any other Indian carnivore especially tiger, can be managed on the same lines. The experience of the past two years tells us that it is not true. Kuno management along with all officers involved in the Cheetah Project have the humility to accept this fact and readied themselves for new learnings along with few de-learnings." The report goes on to state the many differences between the two cats.

"Though it was inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi," Dubey said that "the project is more influenced by the NTCA, and they seem to have supremacy over the state government. Unfortunately, the NTCA has not been very responsible ... the project, which was to be a wildlife conservation and restoration effort, based on free ranging cheetahs, has turned into a captive breeding project." If captive breeding is the goal, he said, "Vantara is doing better than the Government of India's efforts to introduce African cheetahs, as currently there are more cheetahs in their facility at Jamnagar."

"Evidently, nothing seems to be happening according to the CAP and the MoU. These arrangements have failed," Dubey added. According to him, the departure of the South African experts and the decision of a South African veterinarian to leave the project and join Vantara raise "questions about how the project is being run. Currently, the project is fully dependent on local staff who have very limited knowledge and experience related to cheetahs." This was also echoed by Ranjitsinh, who suggested that local staff and officials involved in the project need training from foreign experts.

The 2024 newsletter presents the project as a success, highlighting successful breeding in captivity as a sign of the cheetahs' "acceptance of Indian conditions." It goes on to state, "We learnt it at a cost of losing one female cheetah. But the success in breeding in semi wild conditions"—meaning, in captivity—"and building future generation of Indian born cheetahs is the key for the success of the project."

International laws and expert bodies strongly recommend against the breeding of cheetahs in captivity for subsequent release in the wild, as the offspring often never learn the skills needed to hunt and survive in the wild. This defeats the purpose of conservation, even as hunting reserves and zoos may engage in the practice for commercial benefit. Moreover, under Namibian law, which could be applicable to the cheetahs moved from there to India, captive breeding of cheetahs caught from the wild is prohibited.

"Captive breeding is a challenging undertaking that needs careful planning and genetic considerations," Wachter said, and it is "best done within the framework of international cooperation and coordination." But the question is what is the goal of captive breeding in India. "This has not been communicated, thus opens new questions and speculations. Whatever goal it has, it is certainly not the original goal of Project Cheetah which is to establish a free-ranging cheetah population. It is actually quite the contrary." She found it "rather disappointing that the project was planned without considering the latest knowledge of the cheetah's ecology and biology." While she recognised that the scale of the project meant that it took years of planning, she pointed out that "during these years, new scientific work on free-ranging cheetahs was produced, which could have been considered."

"Success is not all about the survival of the animal, but the objectives of the project need to be fulfilled," Faiyaz Khudsar said. "African cheetahs were brought to fill a gap in the trophic structure of grasslands and improve the management and conservation of grasslands and associated flora and fauna in India. Therefore, an assessment keeping grasslands as the focus of the introduction of African cheetahs, is essential to assess the success." This aspect is especially important in the context of India's efforts to pose on the global stage as a leader in taking measures to manage and mitigate the effects of climate change. According to scientists, one of the core aspects of the mitigation efforts is the protection of grasslands and open forest ecosystems, with equal emphasis being given to ensuring justice for the traditional communities of people dependent on these systems. I found that, far from protecting traditional forest-based communities, the Modi government is not even paying enough attention to its own goal of conserving its prized cheetahs.

{FOUR}

THE MULTI-YEAR QUEST to bring cheetahs to India has required the Modi government to make further compromises. For one, India appears to have changed its strong, ethical and consistent stand against the sale of ivory, which is banned under the Wild Life Protection Act. Soon after receiving cheetahs from Namibia, in November 2022, India abstained from voting, at a conference of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, on a proposal to allow the commercial sale of ivory. The CITES allows certain species to be traded so long as the animals in

question are born in captivity and other regulatory conditions are met, while other species and their body parts are strictly banned from trade under any circumstances. Namibia has been keen to remove the ban, in order to push ivory exports in the international market. Conservationists have described India's abstention as an attempt to appease the country in exchange for its supply of cheetahs.

On 17 January 2023, a memorandum of understanding was signed between the Indian and South African governments, involving the translocation of one hundred twenty cheetahs to India over an initial period of ten years. "The African conservationists involved in the project have surplus cheetahs they want to get rid of," the conservationist Ullas Karanth told ABC News, "and they have no idea of the social conditions in India these cheetahs will face."

Nearly three months earlier, Vincent van der Merwe—the South African expert associated with the project who died last month—had admitted to a news outlet that "South Africa has a surplus of cheetahs and we would have to euthanise or contracept them, neither of which is optimal. So relocating is a good idea." Van der Merwe indicated that multiple interests had converged to make Project Cheetah happen. "There are definitely a lot of ambitious people involved enjoying the media attention," he added, "but it's also been a dream for many high-profile Indian conservationists." His own ideas about the project's outcome—though not reflective of the public stance taken by the other international experts and the Indian government—seemed to have less to do with conservation. "Indian parks have huge, unproductive buffer zones bringing in no revenue. They could hire them out as private game reserves," he had told the same news portal. In response to my questionnaire regarding the MoU, Peter Mbelengwa, the spokesperson for the South African ministry of forestry, fisheries and environment, stated that all the cheetahs sent to India in February 2023 were not from any "state-owned entity" but came from van der Merwe's private breeding and conservation organisation, The Metapopulation Initiative.

Van der Merwe's assessment regarding the need to disperse some of South Africa's cheetah population abroad was echoed by Barbera Creecy, the environment minister of South Africa at the time, in a written reply to the country's legislature on 10 March. The reply stated that, according to the country's Scientific Authority, "the managed metapopulation of cheetahs"—groups of cheetahs under conservation programmes—"has shown an increasing trend over the period 2004-2022, with the number of cheetahs in many reserves nearing carrying capacity." This made South Africa "well placed" to export cheetahs to another country. By this time, the government was already at the centre of a small storm. A conservation group, the EMS Foundation, had unsuccessfully petitioned Creecy to halt the export of cheetahs, terming it effectively illegal under South African law and emphasising that the scientific evidence regarding the viability of India's cheetah project was "not robust."

This petition, among several others I accessed, had been submitted by the group's lawyers a day before the 12 cheetahs were flown to India. The petition expressed the foundation's view that "the anticipated benefit to relations between South Africa and India" through Project Cheetah "is outweighed by the risks to the local cheetah population, the high likelihood that the project will not have significant benefit to global conservation, and by the likely harsh impact on individual cheetah welfare." After the government did not respond, the group's lawyers wrote to the ministry again in May, when the cheetahs in Kuno began to die in quick succession.

This time, they raised the alarm regarding the South African government's claim that copies of transport and export permits—a prerequisite for the export of cheetahs in accordance with the CITES—did not exist, while medical records of the exported cheetahs were unavailable. The controversy snowballed further over the next few months. The government claimed before the legislature that, despite the spate of deaths among the African cheetahs in India, all the surviving cheetahs had been released into free-roaming conditions. This was patently incorrect, as animal welfare lawyers quickly pointed out to the environment ministry. According to one law firm's letter to Creecy, sent in October 2023, Project Cheetah's stakeholders had confirmed to the firm that none of the cheetahs were free-roaming. Instead, all the evidence indicated that the cheetahs "are essentially kept in a large safari-like enclosures and not being introduced for rewilding."

India has repeatedly neglected to send quarterly progress reports on the project, which are required under the MoU with South Africa.

The South African government now seems to be on the back foot, with conservationists, carnivore biologists and wildlife expert groups across the country banding together to demand transparency and public discussion on the shaky science and convoluted politics behind Project Cheetah. Sustained coverage of the project's wayward trajectory by the South African media has helped to keep the issue in the limelight. In

February this year, Mbelengwa, the ministry spokesperson, confirmed to me that the South African government had not yet fixed a date for sending more cheetahs to India.

India, for its part, has repeatedly neglected to send quarterly progress reports on the project—a requirement under the MoU. In fact, the Modi government has gone one step further by shutting down media coverage on its continuing violations of the MoU. On 21 January, the *Times of India* published a report that anonymously quoted a project official who stated that the next batch of cheetahs from South Africa, earlier scheduled to arrive in February, was delayed because the Indian government failed to submit the required quarterly reports and because government authorities had overlooked the need to arrange permissions from the CITES. Within hours, the NTCA sent a rejoinder stating that the article "is bereft of facts and replete with inconsistencies, which are totally misleading" and accusing the newspaper of failure to "meet the ethical standards of journalism, which calls for duly cross checking the facts." On 23 January, in a sign of the publication caving under the pressure, the *ToI* published another piece that quotes at length the government's claims mentioned in the rejoinder. I cross-checked the facts with the South African government a month after this incident, and received confirmation that it was in possession of only annual reports for 2022–23 and 2023–24.

With the Modi government now in talks to hand over a Project Cheetah site to Vantara, political, corporate and international interests appear to be coming together.

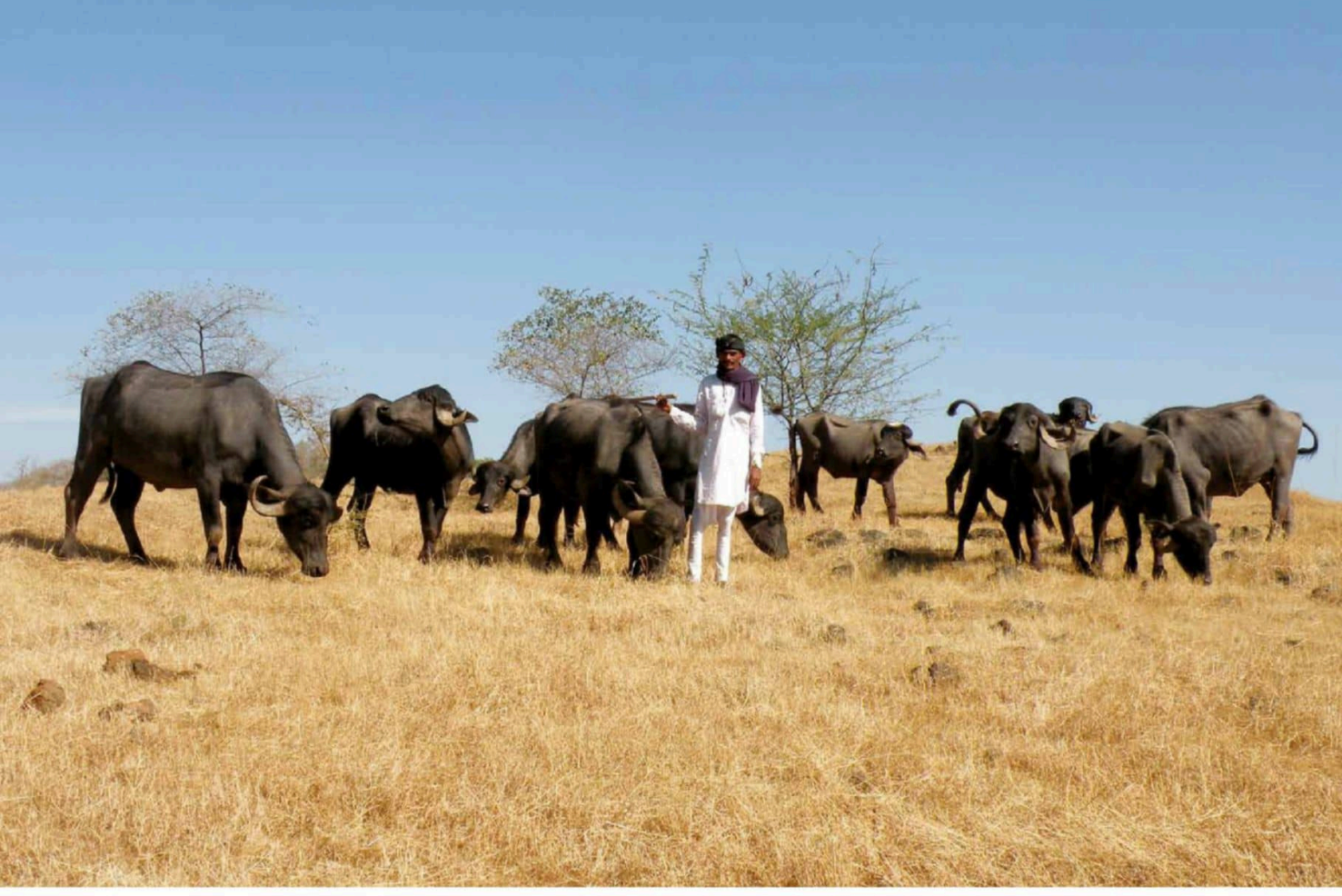
Without a guarantee that South Africa will send more cheetahs, the Modi government has been trying to shop around in other African countries. In January this year, government officials told the media that 20 cheetahs from Kenya would reach India between 25 February and 25 September, and would undergo quarantine at Gandhisagar before their release into the wild. Additionally, media reports have revealed that the government has approached Botswana as well. "It doesn't make sense to me," a cheetah expert based in Botswana told me on the condition of anonymity. "Most excess cheetah come from South Africa and Namibia as they have small reserves that get full and need off take. Botswana cheetahs are free roaming throughout so I'm not convinced we are involved," they added, "we don't have excess animals suitable for reintroduction. Neither does Kenya."

ITS HIND LEGS resting on a table covered with a spotless white cloth, a lion cub inched restlessly towards a steel feeding bottle in Modi's hands. The camera zoomed in and out on the scene: cubs walked, over a plush silk carpet, around the legs of Modi's chair. The room's upholstery was a combination of sterile grey, beige and blues, and the human–animal interaction stood out as an endearing visual for Delhi's television news anchors on the afternoon of 4 March. Modi was inaugurating Vantara, a privately owned wildlife centre spread over fourteen hundred hectares of Reliance's Jamnagar refinery complex. As he strolled past the private facility's enclosures and fed animals off the palm of his hands, at one point, the camera homed in on his black outdoor utility vest, its chest pocket decorated with the Project Cheetah logo.

Since Modi's visit, a joint investigation by the German publication *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and the Venezuelan media outlet Armando Info has revealed that Vantara, owned by Anant Ambani, the youngest son of the Reliance chairperson, Mukesh Ambani, has received at least thirty-nine thousand wild animals from over thirty countries since 2022. Several of the imported animals in Vantara actually belong to species that are subject to an international trade ban, under the CITES. The report notes that Vantara has been under international scrutiny for bypassing restrictions under the CITES, possibly with cover from the Indian government.

Among Vantara's large and varied population of exotic, endangered animals are more than ninety African cheetahs, including over a dozen cubs. A 2024 investigation by *Himal* found that Vantara has been sourcing animals not only from private entities in India and abroad but also from state-owned zoos in Gujarat and Assam. Some state zoos have also sent to Jamnagar exotic species that were given to them after being seized from trafficking operations. In addition, state forest departments, especially in Maharashtra, have sent wildlife from mining-affected regions and sites of human–animal conflict—often related to a reduction in wildlife habitat—to the private compound, without taking into consideration the environmental and wildlife impacts from its proximity to one of the world's largest oil refineries. The *Himal* investigation found that "Vantara has poached veterinary and animal-care staff from conservation NGOs across India."

Over the past six years, Vantara's expansion has been aided by a weakening of India's laws relating to private ownership and trade of wildlife. Media reports and experts have speculated that Vantara might set up private reserves or even a commercial breeding operation where vulnerable and endangered species are bred and sold to governments and private buyers. Although its rescue



operation, the Greens Centre, denied to *Himal* that there were any plans to build a breeding farm, the ANI video of Modi's visit to the facility showed lots of young animals and a state-of-the-art neonatal care centre hosting cubs.

Where an animal comes from is an important piece of the conservation puzzle. According to international guidelines laid down by bodies such as the IUCN, different species and sub-species cannot be allowed to inter-breed and mix. So, it becomes important to know, for instance, if the animals being brought to India for the country's cheetah conservation programme are from the northeast African or the southeast African sub-species, and whether they were caught from the wild or bred in captivity. Not only has Vantara not been transparent about the origin of many animals, including cheetahs—in some cases, this information might not even be available while conducting trade—its campus has several animals that are not allowed to be traded. Conservationists and scientists in South Africa have raised alarm with their government that these animals may have been smuggled, with the Indian government providing cover to the private entity, in violation of the CITES, IUCN guidelines and South African law.

With the Modi government now in talks to hand over an upcoming Project Cheetah site to Vantara, the unholy trinity of political, corporate and international interests appears to be coming together—even as India's purported goal of cheetah conservation in the wild falls apart. But Vantara's potential involvement in the cheetah programme not only portends the takeover of biodiversity conservation by corporate entities, answerable not to the country's citizens but to their own shareholders, it also risks adding to the litany of colossal errors and multifaceted violations of conservation science, ethics and international laws in Project Cheetah. Unmindful as ever, the government plans to set up a captive breeding programme for African cheetahs at Banni. No one I asked could answer where the cheetahs for this enterprise would come from. Whether or not Vantara ends up supplying them, the question is, who will pay the price, and how much will it be? ■

ABOVE: Although Banni's Maldharis have been fighting a lengthy legal battle to secure their centuries-old rights to use and maintain the grassland, the Modi government did not consult them before announcing its plan to set up a captive breeding programme for cheetahs there.

AJT JOHNSINGH / WWF-INDIA AND NCF / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

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COMFORT ZONE

The Citroen Basalt has loads of fans. We meet one of its biggest!

Originality is a rare phenomenon these days. Amidst an epidemic of conformity, it takes a lot to think independently, to make decisions that are refreshingly original and wise. This applies to all of our pursuits but, especially, to buying yourself a very good car – like the one you see in these photographs, for example!

Of course you know it's a Citroen Basalt; its coupe-SUV lines are an instant giveaway of that and, despite being on the market for months now, it continues to turn heads just as it did when the wraps were first taken off it back in August 2024. Is that what motivated Fakhruddin Khambaty, the beaming owner of the very Basalt you see here, to buy one?

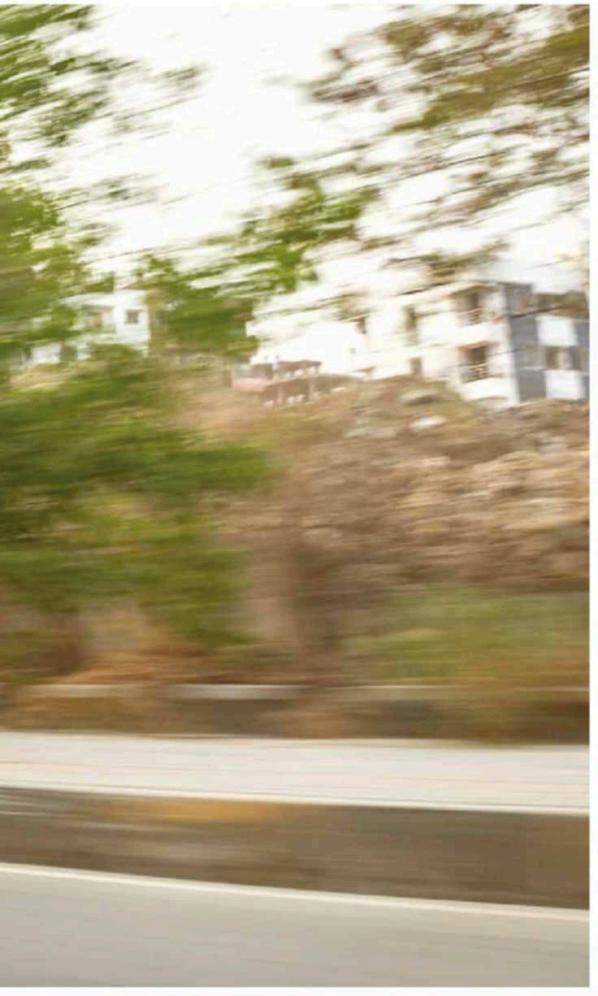
'Actually, no! I like to maintain a low profile but the Basalt just gets everyone around too excited. I get honked at in traffic so often, only to be given a thumbs up,' he says, in a disarmingly candid confession. Clearly not a fan of his newfound celebrity status, Fakhruddin's decision to buy a Basalt went deeper than just its impressive coupe-SUV styling. An early Basalt customer, his lookout began with his need of a serious upgrade in terms of comfort for his family of five.

For an independent thinker immersed in the IT world, Fakhruddin is pleasantly rooted to his family. A testament to that is his home in a Pune highrise, a canvas generously dedicated to his senior citizen parents, wife and his car-enthusiast son aged 5. It's a family that bonds as much over meals as over long-distance road trips – a regular fixture in the Khambaty's calendar – and, clearly, it's their comfort that takes centrestage when the conversation involves the car of the house.

Having upgraded from a succession of hatchbacks, Fakhruddin was insistent on a proper 5-seater, not pleased with the impractical middle seat most cars in the Rs 10-15 lakh price range offer. That he's a thorough automobile nut, committed to real-world research, helped cement his decision. The Basalt's ride quality and comfort, he believes, is way superior to anything else out there.

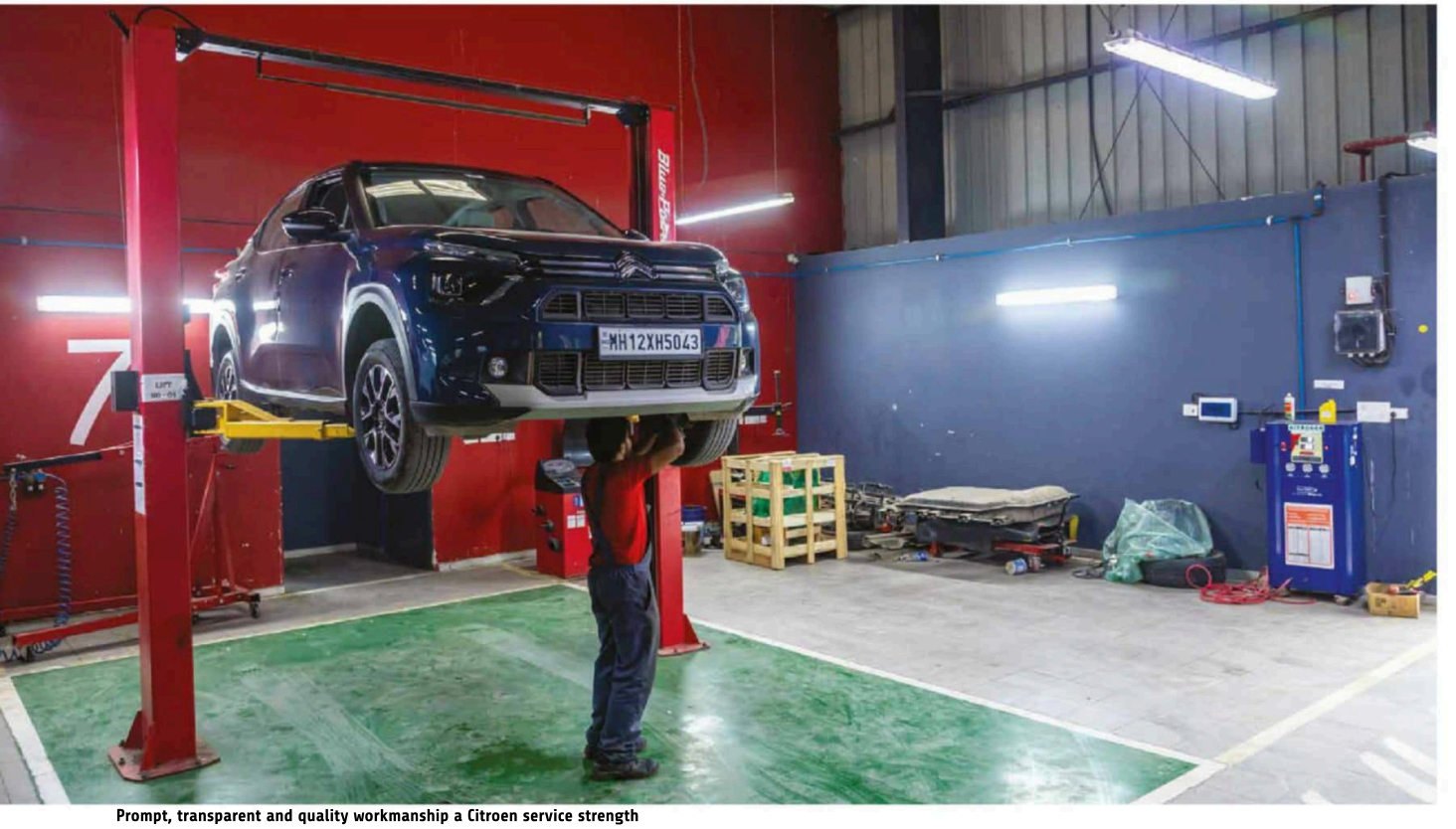
'The test drive itself was an eye-opener. Instead of being restricted to good roads, the Citroen dealership insisted I drove on an exceptionally unruly stretch, where the ride quality impressed me to the point of making an instant decision – ruling against 9 other cars I had shortlisted!' he says. 'Soon enough, we were on the subject of which colour we had to pick – so we drew chits! Everyone picked Cosmo Blue!' he adds with a hearty laugh.

As it turns out, the day Fakhruddin had set aside to meet us happened to be the very day he'd booked a service appointment, so he happily agreed to take us on a drive. Over the course of the hour-long journey, courtesy Pune's infamously erratic traffic, he thoughtfully narrated his insights on owning a Basalt. 'I have a 60 km commute which I do thrice a week and I was clear about wanting an automatic,' he



A plush customer lounge and a service advisor who's all ears

Putting the Basalt through its paces is owner Fakhruddin Khambaty



Prompt, transparent and quality workmanship a Citroen service strength

BASALT
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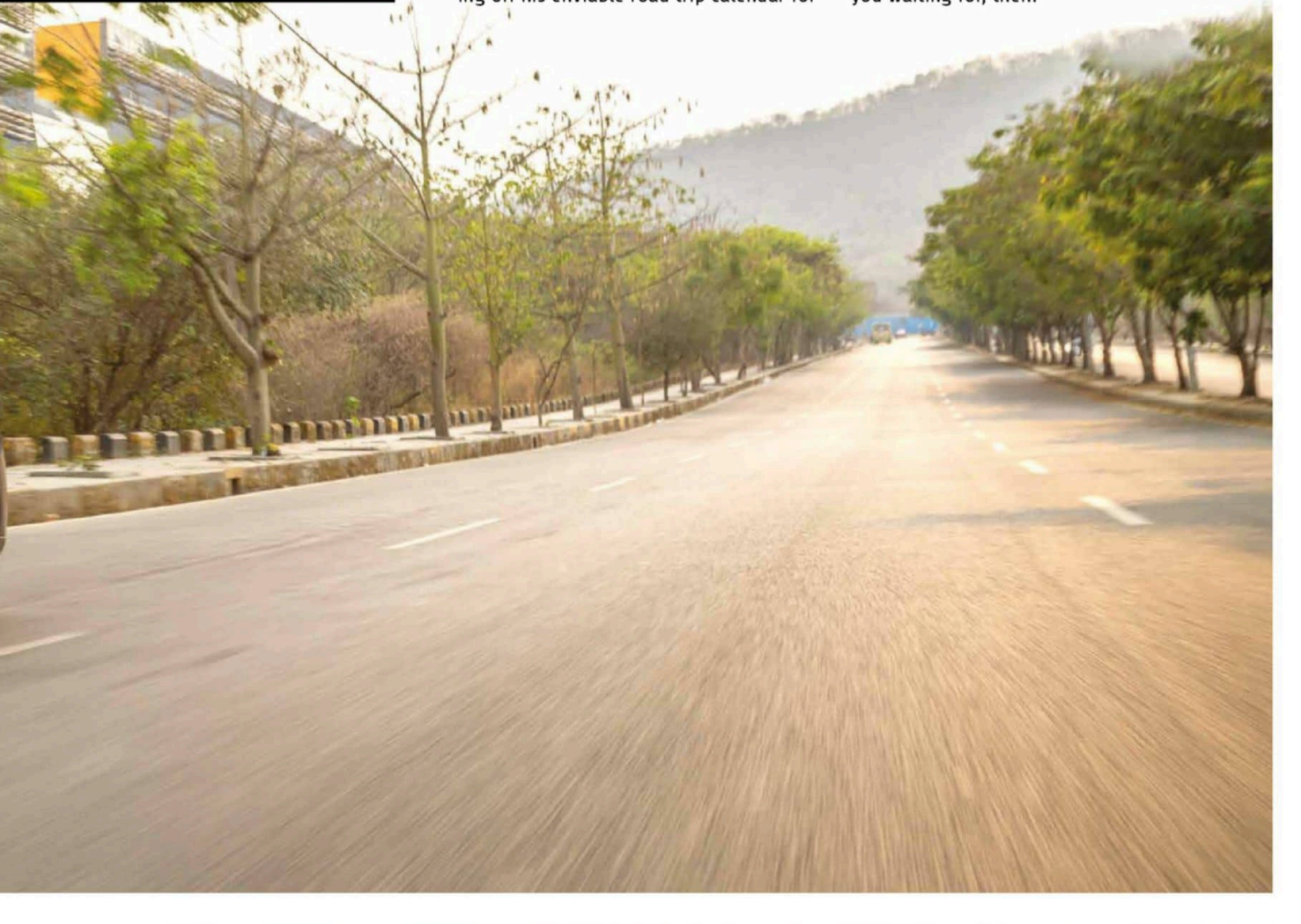
explains. 'Comfort, like I said, was top priority and I also wanted something seriously practical. A great boot, great seats, an uncomplicated suite of features – all the prerequisites for someone who spends a lot of time behind the wheel. The Basalt was, therefore, an easy choice to make.' It's hard to argue with that, but is living with a Basalt as delightful as driving one?

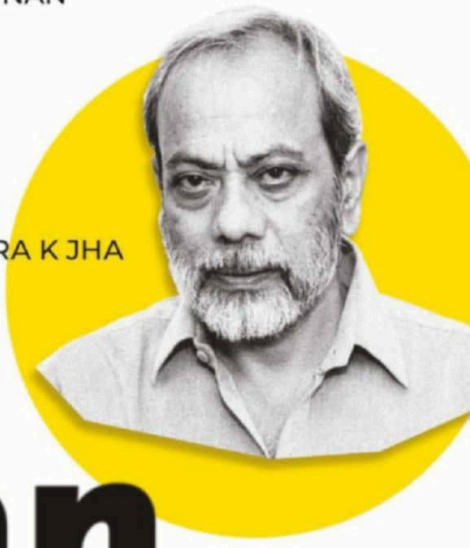
'Absolutely. The service experience has been very confidence-inspiring. From the way I am treated as a customer to how well everything is communicated and, of course, the quality of workmanship, my experience with Citroen has been a very positive one. You see, since we travel so much, there is no substitute for peace of mind. Given the Basalt's ride comfort, we do actually venture into remote places, and knowing my car will be well taken care of gives me the confidence to really travel and explore,' he says, before reeling off his enviable road trip calendar for the year ahead which he invites us to as well! At the B4S Motors Citroen L'atelier located in the heart of Hinjewadi, Pune's IT district, we see what he means.

His Basalt is instantly guided into the elaborate service bay while he is escorted to a swish customer lounge where an advisor engages in a patient exchange, looking into any queries or issues that require resolution – all of this while they can see the car being attended to through a large glass window! That inspires peace of mind, for sure! With the formalities swiftly dealt with, the Basalt gets a thorough service, emerging barely an hour later looking brand new. It really is that simple!

Okay, we already knew driving a Basalt – or any Citroen, for that matter – was a happy and rewarding experience but, as we've learned through the Khambatys, living with one is even more so. Always wanted a Basalt? Well, what are you waiting for, then?



VIDYA KRISHNAN



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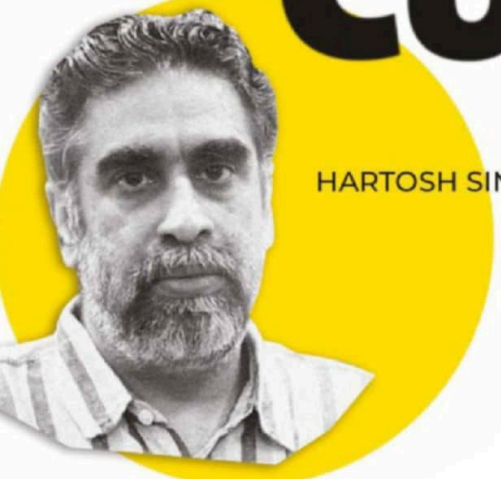

HARTOSH SINGH BAL

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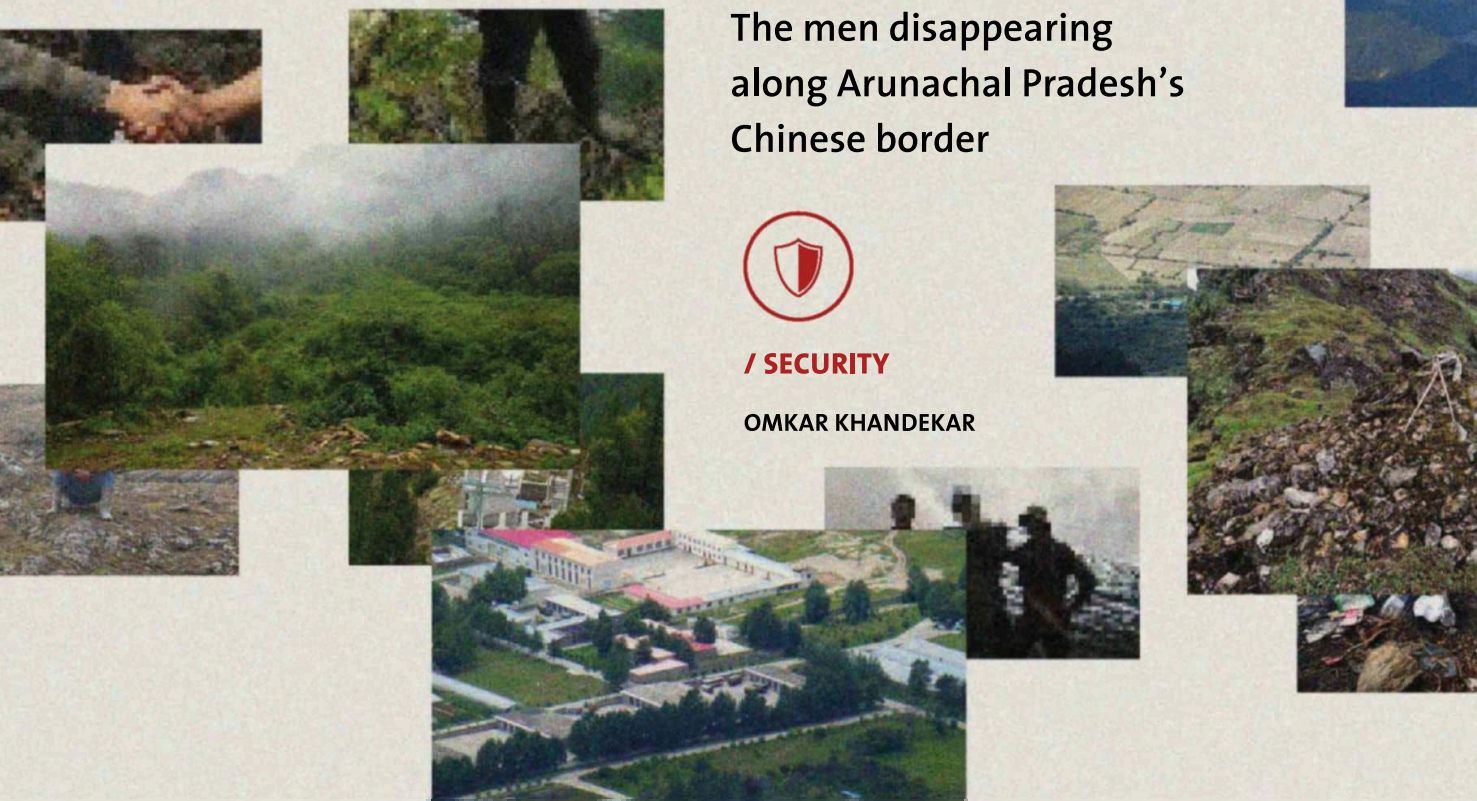
THE CARAVAN

SAVING TAPOR PULLOM

The men disappearing along Arunachal Pradesh's Chinese border

/ SECURITY

OMKAR KHANDEKAR



SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

PREVIOUS SPREAD: These images are part of a stash of photographs found by Tapor Pullom's family years after he disappeared in 2015.

BELOW: A photo of Tapor Pullom from a pendrive found by his family years after he disappeared in 2015.

IN SEPTEMBER 2015, Tapor Pullom went hunting and never came back. His family did not think much of it at first. The 46-year-old had been venturing into the mountains near his village of Monigong, in Arunachal Pradesh, since he was a child. The mountains were mostly safe. You might at most encounter a bear or a leopard, and even they prefer to keep their distance. When he did not return within a week, the Pulloms began to worry. Winter was coming. The bald peaks visible from the village were starting to pull on a blanket of snow. Tapor had promised to be back before that happened.

Taka Yorchi, a cousin, had accompanied Tapor but returned alone after 11 days. This was unusual. In the jungle, hunters do not abandon each other. It had been Yorchi's first hunt. He told the Pulloms that he fell sick and that Tapor asked him to return. Seeing his pale face and sunken eyes, they did not ask too many questions.

Instead, the Pulloms decided to comb the forests. It was not going to be easy. Monigong lies at an elevation around two thousand metres. You hack your way through walls of trees, braving insects that can leave you itching for days, or cause dehydration and death. A GPS device is seldom of any help. Rivers are checkpoints, mountain peaks the North Star. Thankfully, Yorchi told them, Tapor followed the same route that hunters from the village had for generations. They would sleep in caves or in the makeshift bamboo huts that dotted the jungle. Whenever they went deeper, they would carve marks on trees.

Nearly two weeks after Tapor disappeared, his brother Tachuk, his son Vicky and two others entered the forest, carrying rice, water and *daav*s—traditional broadswords. They found the marks he had left on trees. They even found his winter clothes, dried meat and his 12-bore gun in a cave. His jacket was dry. The food seemed like it had not been touched for days. For the first time, they started suspecting the worst.

As soon as they returned to Monigong, Tachuk marched straight to Yorchi's house. "It

SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

was just the two of you in there," he snarled. "If something's happened to him, it's your life on the line." Yorchi, a slight and fidgety man, was not used to such confrontations, especially from men carrying swords. "The PLA abducted him!" he cried out. That is the People's Liberation Army. The Chinese Army.

Monigong is located less than twenty kilometres from the Line of Actual Control, the unfenced and disputed border between India and China that affects nearly a million residents of India's easternmost state. Many of them say they have always known where it is: along the ice-capped peaks that separate Arunachal Pradesh from Tibet, rising between two and four thousand metres in altitude. Tapor knew it better than most. He had worked as a porter for the Indian Army's patrols along the border.

animals. One morning, as he was trailing Tapor by around a hundred metres, a few dozen men emerged out of nowhere. Their language sounded distinctly different from that of the Adi tribe, which dominates both sides of the border in this region. They were wearing PLA uniforms.

The men surrounded Tapor. "It was raining," Yorchi said. "I couldn't clearly see what happened next." His survival instincts took over. He dropped his belongings and legged it. Why had he not said anything before? "I was scared," he said. He had no evidence, no alibi to back up his story. And he could not have played the warrior when the soldiers were dragging his cousin away. There were nearly fifty of them.

Shortly after Yorchi's confession, the Pulloms returned to the mountains. They found the spot where

Why would the PLA enter there? Why would they abduct Tapor? Did they chance upon him or were they waiting to ambush him? Was there something about Tapor that they did not know?

Yorchi lives with his three children in Monigong, constructing roads and bamboo shelters for the army. During my visit in October 2023, he had offered to meet me at the Pulloms' residence. We gathered around a wooden fireplace in the living room, sipping tea. Eight years on, most of them had forgiven Yorchi. He avoided making eye contact with those who had not.

Yorchi said that he joined his cousin for the hunt only because he was facing a money crunch. Tapor was eyeing the prized musk deer, which could fetch over a lakh rupees on the black market. They had agreed to share the spoils fifty-fifty.

"It happened on the eighth day," he said. While hunting, Tapor and Yorchi would keep some distance between them, to avoid alerting

Yorchi recalled last seeing Tapor—a downhill slope with knee-length grass. Fresh flakes of snow now covered it. There was little chance of finding footprints.

Tachuk had been there before while hunting. "It was Indian territory," he told me. The peaks that marked the start of Tibet were at some distance still. The family has jostled with many questions since. Why would the PLA enter there? Why would they abduct Tapor? Did they chance upon him or were they waiting to ambush him? Was there something about Tapor that they did not know?

Usually, little of what goes on in Arunachal makes news. The state has 26 tribes and 110 sub-tribes, each with its own culture and language. Like the Pulloms of Monigong, many live in high mountains, separated by thick forests, often without roads and internet connections. It is all too remote, too diverse to cover for India's mainstream media run from Delhi and Mumbai, thousands of kilometres away. They usually have one reporter for the entire Northeast. Even Arunachal's local media can seldom afford the expense of last-mile coverage of their own state. But, in the years after Tapor went missing, big things were happening on the border—the kind that would make the alleged abduction of one hunter from an obscure village in the Himalayas the subject of national conversation.

INDIAN AND CHINESE SOLDIERS came to blows in 2020 on the LAC in Ladakh. Dozens died. The world watched nervously as the two nuclear powers ramped up troop deployments in sub-zero temperatures at altitudes over five thousand metres. It is terrain where the human body fights for breath, where even hardy shepherds and their flocks go sparingly. Around the time, the Indian media started reporting a series of "abductions" by the PLA along the border districts of Arunachal Pradesh: a 21-year-old from Upper Subansiri in March 2020, another five youths from the same district that September, an Upper Siang resident in January 2022. Even in cases where people had gone missing—two men from Anjaw, and two others from East Kameng, in August 2022—China emerged as the prime suspect.

A couple of hundred kilometres from the border, in the town of Pasighat, Amoni Diru had been closely following news reports of such abductions. Diru, aged 25, is the fiancée of Tapor Pullom's eldest son, Vicky. All the reports, she noticed, said that the abductions happened from Indian territory, as was the case with her future father-in-law. For years, Diru had been following up with the Indian Army. The army

is the most active arm of the state in border villages, often involved in schooling, transport and food supply. Plus, Tapor had worked for them as a porter for years. They would promise to look into it but never call back.

In February 2022, after reading one such news report, Diru pulled up the Facebook page of the *Arunachal Times*. "I said a prayer to Jesus, said 'Amen,' and typed in the comments section. 'My father-in-law was abducted too,'" she would tell me later that year. The newspaper reached out to her, wanting to write about Tapor.

The article went viral. Soon, Diru had reporters from across India calling her. Seizing the momentum, she went to Itanagar and held a press conference with Yorchi, and recounted the sequence of events. The Bharatiya Janata Party leader Tapir Gao raised Tapor's abduction in parliament. Diru said the army had called her to their camp and assured her of action.

In the first three cases listed above, the PLA had released the detainees after a few days. However, it stirred a debate on Chinese encroachment into India. Critics accused China of "salami slicing," laying claim over a territory, then nibbling away at it slowly but systematically, as it has with islands in the South China Sea. In a series of media interviews, Gao, the member of parliament from Arunachal East, accused China of occupying buffer zones along the LAC and building roads and bridges to enter Arunachal Pradesh. New Delhi mostly kept mum.

China rejects allegations of encroachment, but it has never seen Arunachal as Indian territory. Arunachal's nearly nine-hundred-kilometre international border was first drawn up in 1914 by Henry McMahon, then foreign secretary of British-ruled India. He drew it primarily along the mountain peaks from the east of Bhutan to the west of Myanmar, with the Dalai Lama's kingdom of Tibet to the north and British India to the south. "But the McMahon line wasn't demarcated on the ground," Mukut Mithi, a former chief minister of Arunachal Pradesh, told me. "That's how the problem started."

China considers the McMahon line a British imposition. When it annexed Tibet, in 1959, it extended its claim over the North East Frontier Agency—as Arunachal was called at the time—declaring it part of south Tibet. Its leader, Mao Zedong, would often say that it was China's responsibility to liberate the region, along with Ladakh and Sikkim. In the 1962 Sino-Indian War, the PLA made it nearly fifty kilometres into parts of the NEFA before withdrawing. Like India's position on Azad Jammu and Kashmir, China's official maps today show the whole Indian state within its borders. They call it Zangnan and also have different names for its towns.

India calls this "cartographic aggression," but the lack of a consensus over the border means soldiers from the two countries often patrol the same stretches. Indian soldiers often report finding Chinese alcohol, cigarettes and packs of instant noodles in jungle camps along the border. Sometimes, there are Chinese flags painted on a rock. They then scrub and replace these with the tricolour. "This has been going on since 1962," Mithi said.

Such games of one-upmanship seem comical, but happen because neither side wants an all-out war. Despite occasional skirmishes over the years, China and India have shared a mostly peaceful relationship. Army commanders regularly hold flag meetings along the LAC to resolve disputes. At the Indo-Tibetan Border Police camp in Gelling, in late 2023, I saw a board with Hindi, English and Mandarin icebreakers soldiers could use, such as "Have you had your meal?" "Do you need ration?" "I am not fluent in Chinese" and "Please go back."

Yet, concerns over territorial capture remain. The Indian media has often reported China's attempts to build roads in disputed regions. Since 2016, China has been constructing and fortifying hundreds of border villages in Tibet, complete with houses, airstrips and watchtowers. They also enticed people to move into remote areas by offering spacious homes and generous subsidies. The idea is that they double up as its eyes and ears. India's Vibrant Village programme is seen as a direct response to this. It aims at providing over six hundred villages along the LAC with roads, mobile connectivity, employment opportunities and border tourism. "We want people to take pictures and tag them on Twitter or Instagram," an army officer told me near the Gelling border post, explaining that this helped further legitimise India's claim over the region.

Caught in this geopolitical tug-of-war are residents of the border villages. For centuries, they had taken cows and goats, hunted bears and deer, and bartered for salt, sugar, ghee and rice in Tibet. In the western region, Buddhist-majority villages often paid taxes to the Dalai Lama's kingdom, while the Mishmi people of the east sent priests to perform rituals in Tibet. Sonia Shukla, a

Caught in this geopolitical tug-of-war are residents of the border villages. For centuries, they had taken cows and goats, hunted bears and deer, and bartered for salt, sugar, ghee and rice in Tibet.

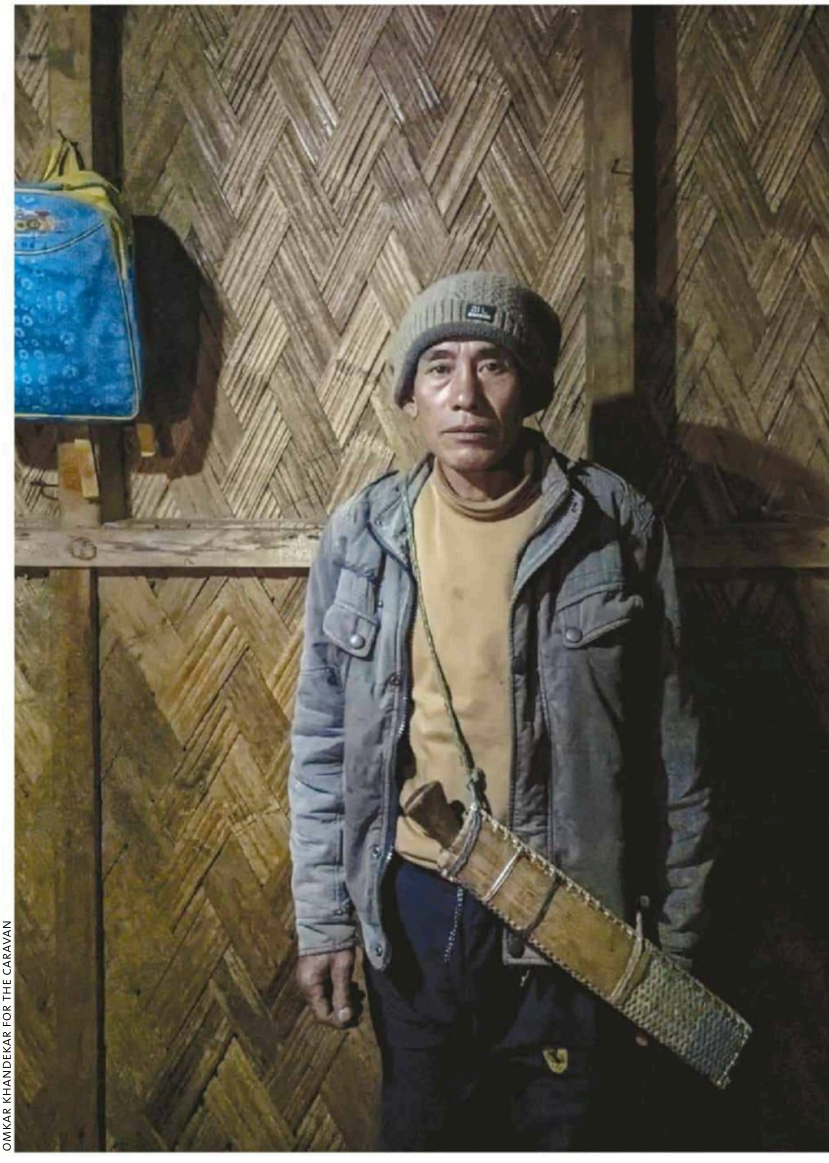
fellow at the Institute of Chinese Studies who is writing a book on the border villages, told me this continued even after the 1962 war. Soldiers of both countries knew of these deep cross-border ties, she said, but often looked the other way. "After all, the visitors could help with intelligence-gathering from the other side."

Such abductions have been going on for decades, Vinod Bhatia—a retired lieutenant general and director of the Centre for Joint Warfare Studies, a government think tank—told me. The border villages are often dozens of kilometres away from the nearest police station or administrative centres, and there is little interest in keeping a record of abductions. "Even if I report to the district administration, they'll say these are normal things that happen every day," Bhatia said.

The recent spike in abductions, Shukla said, means that there is now an attempt at "hardening the borders." She pointed to Miram Taron, the Upper Siang resident abducted by China in January 2022. On returning, he alleged that the PLA had tortured him in custody. "If one guy has been beaten up and sent back, he will come back and tell horror stories," Shukla said. "These will get amplified and will be told in even graphic detail to others in the so-called Chinese whispers. That acts as a deterrent." Residents of the region had no say when borders were drawn in their backyard. Now, they risk their lives if they cross over.

In 2020, Tadak Pakba, the president of the All Tagin Students' Union—a tribal youth group—campaigned for the rescue of the five youths the PLA had abducted from Upper Subansiri district. The incident traumatised residents of border villages, he told me. Even after the youths returned, many were too scared to go to the jungles near the LAC. "When they do go, many say they can't access areas they could fifteen or twenty years ago," he said. "In some parts, the Indian Army stops them from going. They have to get special permissions to access our own mountains." Pakba, too, reckoned that abductions by the PLA have been going on for decades, though their frequency did seem to be increasing. "The difference is, we know of it now because of social media."

Many of the nearly two dozen people I interviewed echoed the sentiment. Diru did too, during our first conversation in late 2022. The inability of hunters and herders to safely access their mountains was changing their way of life.



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"It's part of our identity," she said. "It's the only way many people know to survive."

There was more to Tapor's abduction, however. One evening during my October 2023 visit, I sat down for dinner in Diru's three-room house in Pasighat. The smoky scent of pork over firewood wafted in from the kitchen. In the months since our first chat, Diru had organised protest marches, held press conferences and lobbied politicians on both sides of the aisle. Over time, the legislators became unavailable, and the news cycle moved on. Despite assurances, the Indian Army had little to share on Tarpor's whereabouts. Sitting across from me on a floor mat, Diru looked crushed.

ABOVE: Taka Yorchi pictured at the residence of his cousin Tapor Pullom in 2023. Yorchi says he saw a group of Chinese army soldiers capture his cousin while they were out hunting near the Indo-China border in 2015.

BELOW: Tapor Pullom's village Monigong is located less than 20 kilometres from the Indo-China border. Like several border villages in Arunachal, it is connected to the nearest district headquarters by bumpy roads and spotty phone networks.

"I think I know why he was never found," she said. "Because Tapor Pullom used to be an intelligence agent."

DIRU HAS NEVER MET TAPOR PULLOM. He had been missing for nearly a year when she met Vicky. He had been missing for nearly a year when she met Vicky. But she speaks of him with the affection and familiarity of a biographer: his quick temper, his skills with the daav, his religiosity and howhe had once kicked Vicky "like a football" for not attending Sunday mass.

Diru and Vicky were born in the then-undivided West Siang district—only fifty kilometres apart, but in completely different worlds. Diru is from Tato, a mountain town in central Arunachal Pradesh where her father is a civil contractor. In a state that largely runs on doles from the union government, where political allegiances are fluid, he benefited from backing the winning horse in assembly elections. Where most of the town's residents work on farms and live in bamboo houses, the Dirus own a solar-powered bungalow and drive an SUV.

The Adi tribe the Dirus belong to is a patriarchal community, with defined gender roles. Men hunt, women cook. Men drink, women pour. Both genders work on farms and forage in the forest, but only men get to own land and have the final word in disputes. Diru never

buckled to the norms. She excelled at studies, played several sports and won a beauty pageant. She spoke up in family or community disputes and often had men sitting up and hanging on to her words. A lot of them, she realised soon, admired not just her articulation but also her looks. Fluent in eight languages, she made sure to say exactly what she thought of them. These skills came handy in the years she spent looking for Tapor.

Diru met Vicky at a dance rehearsal at his engineering college in 2016. "He was a short, scrawny boy, and he couldn't dance to save his life," Diru recalled. But she liked that he was subtle about his affections, even if he sometimes made a fool of himself. At a college potluck, he was the only one who ate the meat broth she had cooked. "He praised it to high heavens," she said. "I later realised I had forgotten to add salt." Their phone calls would go late into the night. Vicky, she found out, was the eldest of three siblings. A year before his father was abducted, his mother had died. Vicky's parents wanted him to land a government job and had spent all their earnings on top boarding schools. After them, a local church sponsored the education of Vicky and his siblings. "His family story touched me," Diru said. "Someone who has struggled understands the importance of life and the people. They'd not hurt others."

Vicky started helping her out with assignments, joining her family in the walnut fields during the harvest season. She involved herself in his life, too. When Vicky's grandfather was trying to sell off Tapor's land, she travelled to Monigong and initiated legal proceedings against him. Some villagers asked her why she was interfering—she was not even married to Vicky. In the face of this opposition, Vicky stepped in. "Her word is as good as my word," he told them. It was this trip that firmed up Diru's resolve to look for her fiancé's father.

In the past decade, Diru has moved heaven and earth to search out Tapor's whereabouts. She has written letters to the prime minister and his cabinet, the chief minister and state legislators. Last year, when Rahul Gandhi was in Arunachal Pradesh for the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra, she met and requested his intervention. At one point, she told me, she even paid someone ₹35,000 to cross over into China and make enquiries. "He said there's someone there, but he's been transferred to a jail in the Tibetan capital."

"I think I know why he was never found," Diru said. "Because Tapor Pullom used to be an intelligence agent."

Between 2016 and 2022, Diru said, she made over two dozen trips to army camps in West Siang and Shi Yomi, in Arunachal Pradesh, as well as Assam's Jorhat district. She would drive for hours, her scooter navigating pockmarked roads alongside SUVs stuffed with people and spilling with bags. At the camps, she almost always met a different officer—people were transferred out regularly. She would recount the story all over again. "They were all polite," Diru told me. "They always said, '*Kahiye, main apki kya sahayata kar sakta hoon?*'"—Tell me how I can be of help to you—"and promised to look into it. But they'd never call back."

Simultaneously, she started digging into Tapor's past. He was part of the village's warrior clan but often acted like a goon. He had chopped off people's fingers, bashed them in the head with sticks and fought rival tribes till his fists turned bloody. His friends would say he could take on any adversary—man, animal or nature. His bamboo house was once decorated with the skulls of bears and wild buffaloes.

"Yet, most told me that he had a good heart," Diru recalled. Tapor had made a name for himself by introducing Catholicism to the village and helping to construct its only church. His house always bustled with friends and neighbours, even those who had once clashed with him. As Vicky recalled fondly, "If he beat you up, he paid for your treatment too."

Diru's efforts impressed the residents of Monigong. When she organised a protest march in March 2022, hundreds turned up. It was an remarkable effort for a tiny village a three-hour ride along bumpy roads and waterfalls from the district headquarters, Tato, where visiting election candidates would make tall promises of blacktop roads and cellphone towers. After her interview with *Arunachal Times* went viral, journalists began coming in too—and exposing how none of these promises had materialised. At the protest march, for an hour, they walked the road connecting their town to the rest of the state, placards in hand, chanting "Release Tapor Pullom" and "We want government intervention." There were lots of new faces, and tongues wagged freely. "At the time, I overheard some people talking about it, that I shouldn't be doing this," Diru said. "Because he used to work with the army."

Like many in border villages, dozens of men in Monigong work as porters for the army. They accompany the soldiers on patrols, carrying food and tents, and helping them navigate the wily mountains. Tapor's children thought he did the same, which was why he would sometimes disappear for weeks on end.

The big reveal came only in April 2023. Diru was rummaging through an old suitcase belonging to Tapor

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and found a USB drive. It had dozens of photos of Tapor and his hunter and porter friends. And then some that absolutely terrified her.

At my request, Diru showed me these photos. In some, you see Tapor, short and lean, gun in hand, dagger by the waist, sitting by bonfires or standing in the snow. Then, the forests dissipate, and you see a sprawling township, with high rises, street lamps and a running track. Then comes a watchtower with a camouflage pattern and army barracks with Chinese flags. All of them clicked from a mountaintop at a considerable distance. I shared these photos with two military veterans who have served on the Indo-China border. They confirmed the photos were Chinese border settlements in Tibet. "There is no doubt of it," one said. The job of taking such photos, they said, was usually assigned to "civil assets"—freelancers who are paid tens of thousands per assignment. Most of them are locals from Arunachal's border areas. If caught, they are meant to destroy their equipment and say they are hunters who crossed over inadvertently.

Diru had guessed as much. "When I started asking people in Monigong, someone shared a list of civil assets who got groceries from the army during such missions, five kilograms of rice and two kilograms of sugar," Diru said. "Tapor's name was on it, but it was for a mission in 2014"—a year before he was abducted.

Soon after, Diru went back to the army base in West Siang. "As usual, they invited me in politely," she said. "There was a new officer again. He said, *'Kahiye, main apki kya sahayata kar sakta hoon?'* My head was spinning. I announced that I had some photos that looked like they're from the other side of the border in China. I said, 'I don't know if he's really an asset,' but if they don't cooperate, these photos will be in the media."

The officer looked alarmed, Diru recalled. "'There will be chaos,' he said. 'It's a sensitive issue.'" But she wanted answers—a confirmation or denial of the reason for his abduction—or, at the very least, compensation for all the years Tapor worked for them, for everything the family had suffered after his disappearance. "Finally, the officer said he can't do anything," she told me. "He's since been transferred out."

Despite her threats at the time, Diru wrestled with the idea of revealing Tapor's secret. "If it was true, no one would help me," she admitted. "We see it in the movies too." Her other worry was how it would affect her fiancé. Vicky had abandoned his engineering degree and joined the army in order to help his family out of financial crisis. "What if they call Vicky seditious and fire him?" Diru said.

With time, Diru said, she had realised the issue was bigger than her. "There are lots of people in border areas who work as civil assets," she told me. "Most of them are from financially weak families, without connections. There might be many who have gone missing, but their families haven't spoken up." If Tapor was found, she said, it would set a precedent for others like him. She was also tired. "I have tried everything. This is my last shot."

"There are lots of people in border areas who work as civil assets," Diru told me. "Most of them are from financially weak families, without connections. There might be many who have gone missing, but their families haven't spoken up."

It had been nearly a decade since he went missing, I said, so did she think he was still alive? She took me to her study, a small room with shelves stacked with books on Indian jurisprudence. She pointed at two photos of the Pulloms pinned on the wall. In one, the family of seven is huddled up awkwardly, in baggy tops and t-shirts. The darkness of their bamboo hut is illuminated only by the camera flash. In another, a lanky Tapor sits on the floor next to his wife. Their arms are barely touching. There is a hint of a smile on his face. "Usually, photos this old tend to fade," she said. "His photos haven't. It gives me hope."

THERE ARE NO EASY WAYS to verify conclusively if Tapor indeed was an intelligence agent. "Civil assets" like him are usually off the books and work discreetly enough that the state can deny any association if they are caught. Tapor never told his family that he was a spy. Neither the Indian Army nor the Chinese embassy responded to my questions about his case. But all the evidence seemed to line up, and his story is far from unique.

"Are locals used to gather intelligence? The answer is yes," DS Hooda, a retired lieutenant general who spent part of his four-decade army career overseeing the Indo-China border, told me. "And both sides do it." Unlike India's western border with Pakistan, most of the China border is unfenced. Border villages are often fifteen or twenty kilometres from the LAC. Forests and mountains act as a buffer zone. "To date, a large portion of the LAC has no deployment from either side," Hooda said. That allows room for civilians—hunters and cattle graziers—to sneak in. Their language, accent, facial features and knowledge of the terrain help them blend in, making them ideal intelligence gatherers.

"The Indian security forces would often encourage graziers to go with their cattle to places they felt

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ABOVE: For nearly a decade, Amoni Diru has been leading the search efforts for Tapor Pullom, father of her fiancé.

threatened because of the presence of Chinese patrols," Shukla, the author and researcher, told me. "So much of it was unsaid. They'd ask, '*Udhar kya hai*?'"—What is there? "The guy would be excited. He'd think he'll click a few photos too if he's going there." In return, they would get money or groceries or a tin shed for their house. "It is fascinating that you can do statecraft like this, but in Arunachal you can."

It is a risky endeavour. Civil assets or spies do not enjoy the diplomatic immunity that officials of the Research and Analysis Wing—India's external intelligence agency—who are usually posted safely within Indian embassies, are entitled to. Nor are they covered by international laws such as the Geneva Conventions, which facilitated the return of Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman, who had parachuted into Pakistani territory after an aerial dogfight in 2019. In fact, when caught, most countries do not even acknowledge spies.

"It's not as if he is an employee of the government that you're honour-bound, [or that] there are rules and regulations that you look after the family," the former R&AW chief Vikram Sood told ANI last year. "So, we try to do that, look after the family. That's all we can do, give them employment or jobs." This practice is entirely discretionary.

Over the years, several former spies and their families from the border villages of Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir have decided

BELOW AND NEXT SPREAD: These images are part of a stash of photographs found by Tapor Pullom's family years after he disappeared in 2015. Military experts we spoke to say that these are likely photos of border settlements constructed by the Chinese government in Tibet.

to blow their cover after years of neglect by the Indian government. Some spent decades in Pakistani jails. On returning, they found their parents dead, wives remarried and their families left to fend for themselves. A few sued the Indian government. "We don't want money," *The Print* quoted the brother of Ravindra Kaushik, an agent who had died in custody, as saying. "What we want from the government is recognition."

Why would people do a job where you effectively gamble away your rights as a citizen, with no insurance? Hooda gave several reasons. Some do it out of duty for the country, some for a sense of adventure, or because it raises their standing within their community. "But, honestly, 99.9 percent are doing it for money," he said. In remote regions, where avenues of employment are few, an assignment can net as much as a few lakh rupees.

In Monigong, I met a hunter who went on one such assignment in 2018. He did not want to be named, for fear of reprisals. For years, he said, he had worked as a porter for the army. But then, his mother fell sick, and he needed extra cash to pay her bills. "For jobs like these, you don't deal with the army directly," he told me. "There's someone in the village who acts as a middleman. They just tell you what to click, where and how. Then you go."

His job was to make videos of Chinese military installations across the border.

There was no training, no written or verbal agreement on what would happen to him or his mother if things went wrong. When he submitted the footage, he promptly received ₹20,000. He did not push his luck again. "If they'd caught me," he said, "the Chinese would've made chicken fry out of me." It is an exploitative practice, Shukla said. "But a justification, if there is any in their head, is by saying that they go there anyway, that it's part of their land, their route. And China is preventing them from going on their traditional routes."

His job was to make videos of Chinese military installations across the border. There was no training, no written or verbal agreement on what would happen to him or his mother if things went wrong.

The shared tribal identity between residents on both sides of the border also helps. In 2008, the anthropologist Ambika Aiyadurai met a man from the Mishmi tribe hired by the Arunachal Pradesh Special Branch to plant hidden video cameras along the LAC. In a research paper on the border villages, she recalls that she asked him,

> "Don't you feel scared, it's a risky job. What if the Chinese catch you?" He proudly answered, "There are Mishmis on the other side so they don't harm us because we also look like Chinese." He jokingly pointed out to me that, "If you go you will be shot," and laughed out loud, and continued, "for that matter any educated-looking person will not be spared."

It is unusual for intelligence agents to identify themselves, especially to a journalist. The one I met in Monigong was through Diru. But, while travelling in the border villages, I met another man who confirmed that Tapor was a civil asset—and that he knew because he was one too. The person said he was disenchanted with the Indian security forces for abandoning the search for Tapor. He said he was speaking to me because, when the PLA abducted his son a couple of years ago, Indian forces nearly abandoned him too. *The Caravan* is withholding his name over concerns of reprisals.

Ours was a chance encounter. I had fixed up a meeting with the son over the phone, and he had promised to tell the "real story" of his abduction, but his phone was switched off on the day I arrived, and he had not given me his exact address. Luckily, theirs is a village of only fifty families. Most live in houses of bamboo and thatch, on top of a cliff that is connected to the nearby town by a rickety wooden bridge over a violent river. The family, a local grocer had told me, lived in the only house made of concrete. For all its problems, spying paid better than most other vocations in the village.

At their courtyard, my intended interviewee's mother sat me on a small stool and dialled her husband. In the hour after he arrived, as hens and goats and cows and dogs milled around us, he told me that his son's public identity as a "hunter" is not strictly true. The Indian Army had once sent his son to take photos near the LAC. "The PLA had set up camera sensors there. That's how they found out and ambushed him."

"When I heard of this, I went to the officers and asked how they could send my young son there," the father said. "The officer threatened me, '*Ulta seedha baat karoge toh* I will hit you'"—If you keep talking rubbish, I will hit you. He recalled replying, "I will also give up my name to China. I will also tell them about your battalion."

At the time, some journalists with national news outlets were visiting a neighbouring town. "I told them everything," he said. "But I warned them not to bring up the Indian Army connection, or my son might not come back." The story made national news. The threats worked. Ten days later, the son was back home. But the PLA had tortured him in custody. He could barely sit or sleep. The Chinese soldiers had electrocuted his genitals.

The father returned to his son's reporting officer and requested money for his treatment. "I said, 'I'm not asking for a lakh, just twenty–thirty thousand. The rest I will see.' They didn't even give one rupee." The ordeal left him bitter. He had not expected this to happen to him. "I, too, have worked as a civil asset for many years."

He went on to explain his connection with Tapor. "He and I shared a reporting officer at the local army division," he said. "That's where we met in 2013, 2014 and 2015." During their last meeting, over beer and a meal, Tapor told him that his wife had died and that money was tight. "He couldn't afford his son Vicky's school fees. For that, he said, he'd go on a mission one more time. And that would be his last."

He did not know if Tapor was on an intelligence-gathering mission when he was abducted. But, shortly after, he said, the army company Tapor was working for in Monigong was replaced by another one. "The new officers must've thought, 'It's been so long, and we have no idea who this person is.'" Tapor's search, he assumed, fell off the radar. In any case, civil assets like him are expendable.

SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

"Tapor went missing in 2015. His news came out in the media only in 2022," the father said. "If I too had kept quiet, my son wouldn't be back."

"WHENEVER CHINESE SOLDIERS WANT, they come and have picnics inside our territory, and our government could do nothing," Amit Shah thundered during a campaign speech in the outskirts of Varanasi before the 2014 general election. Shah was in charge of the BJP campaign in Uttar Pradesh that year, and his party took frequent potshots at the Congress-led union government for its inability to secure India's borders. Once Narendra Modi became prime minister, Shah told the impassioned crowd, intruders would not dare cross the border.

The PLA's "picnics" have continued during Modi's decade in power. At the peak of geopolitical tensions in 2020, after India had lost control of parts of Ladakh, Modi rejected reports about it without even mentioning China. In 2023, *The Caravan* republished a police research paper saying that India had lost access to 26 out of 65 patrolling points in Ladakh.

India's reluctance to alienate its bigger, richer, mightier neighbour is understandable. Like most of the world, India's economy is greased by Chinese manufacturing. Every year, the country imports goods worth over $100 billion, including electronics, machinery, clothing and pharmaceuticals, from China—accounting for nearly fifteen percent of its total imports. Despite the union government's Make in India scheme, the trade deficit is only skewing in China's favour by the year.

"When I saw a Tibetan village for the first time, it was a beautiful sight," the hunter from Monigong told me. "They have so much development. High-speed internet, four-lane highways, streetlights, watchtowers. If you drive on the roads here, your car goes *ghadaam–ghadaam*."

Things seem to be getting better, though. Since August 2022, there have been no reported abductions in Arunachal Pradesh. In October 2024, foreign secretary Vikram Misri said that the two sides had resolved the four-year military standoff along the border. Although, any détente is conditional on mutual understanding. And a 2023 Pew Research Center survey indicated that two-thirds of Indians—a historic high—still held an unfavourable view of China.

In a 2016 paper published in the *Indian Defence Review*, Nicolas Groffman, a lawyer and consultant who has studied China for decades, writes how a lack of understanding about each other hinders good relations between the two countries. China and India are neighbours that barely talk to each other. "Most significantly, they do not spy on each other competently," he writes. "India has some very skilled operatives within the Research and Analysis Wing, but few that specialize in China. China has an enormous pool of resources spread across several government departments ... However, China's intelligence services generally behave as if India is not worth spying on." Effective intelligence lessens the likelihood of conflict. "Without sufficient information to the contrary," however, "Indian bureaucrats have convinced themselves that their Chinese counterparts are far more hostile than they are, and vice versa."

Little has changed in the eight years since Groffman's essay. And today, the dispute over Arunachal Pradesh includes a battle for its residents' hearts and minds. In the aftermath of the 1962 war, most stood with India. But, for the newer generations, there is an increasing realisation that the state has been ignored in India's growth story. In my two trips to Arunachal Pradesh, in 2023 and 2024, many complained that the issues they face every day—rampant corruption, poor road and mobile connectivity, lack of employment opportunities and patchy implementation of government schemes—seldom make national news.

In comparison, the infrastructure, GDP and quality of life in Chinese-controlled Tibet have grown exponentially. Indian civil assets have witnessed it firsthand. "When I saw a Tibetan village for the first time, it was a beautiful sight," the hunter from Monigong told me. "They have so much development. High-speed internet, four-lane highways, streetlights, watchtowers. If you drive on the

SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

roads here, your car goes *ghadaam–ghadaam*."

That explains India's recent allocation of hundreds of crores of rupees for development initiatives along the border—Vibrant Villages, Battlefield Tourism and a host of promises to "overhaul" the road, education and infrastructural aspects. Monigong is among the villages identified for development. In November 2024, the governor visited the village and reiterated the promises. But locals had heard it too often. "The government is only interested in us today because of the China dispute," Diru said. Arunachalis, she added, are tired of being pawns in a geopolitical

OMKAR KHANDEKAR FOR THE CARAVAN

battle, not a stakeholder in India's growth story.

In August this year, it will be ten years since Tapor went missing. There has been no information about his whereabouts. When we met in 2023, I asked Diru if she thinks it is still possible for him to return. "Yes," she said firmly. "Because I know someone who had been similarly kidnapped, tried, jailed and returned after years."

That is how, one evening in October 2023, I met Tapor's uncle Nime, better known as "Chinaman." Nime is in his late eighties. He lives in a bamboo hut in Monigong. Weapons and woollens hung on the walls, with a fireplace at its centre. Age had greyed Nime's eyes, bent his back and knocked out his teeth. It had not, however, diminished his flair for storytelling.

For centuries, Nime told me, locals in border villages like Monigong had little connect with India. After its 1962 defeat, the Indian Army started building its presence across the state. In Monigong, fascinated residents watched as men with guns, in trucks and tanks, started building outposts and waving the tricolour. For many, it was their first encounter with India. Having heard of China's invasion of Tibet, its detention and torture of Tibetans who resisted, they largely welcomed the army's efforts.

"Since 1963, the army wanted to know what China was up to," Nime said. The humiliation of 1962 was fresh. The army offered five rupees a day—which was worth far more back then. Nime signed up. His task, he said, was to observe the PLA's numbers and positions, and where it had built roads and camps. Nime had an uncle in Tibet. His family would go over for rituals or to celebrate harvest festivals. If caught or questioned, Nime was to say that he was a hunter and only visiting. "Between 1963 to 1970, I went 22 times," he said. "After the twenty-third time, the army was going to give me a medal. Then my uncle ratted me out."

Nime was produced in a Chinese court and sentenced to nine years in prison. He was handcuffed for most of the first four, along with Tibetan freedom activists. He initially hoped India would come to his aid. When no one did for eight years, he wrote a letter to the jail superintendent confessing his espionage activities. Soon, he told me, he was shifted to a lower security prison.

"Here, they gave me warm clothes and good food," Nime said. "I lived like a king." After he completed his sentence, a group of Chinese soldiers accompanied him to the LAC near Monigong. "They stopped at one point and said, 'Go, this is your land.'"

Nime's family could barely believe he was back. The Indian Army was even more suspicious. "They wanted to check if the Chinese had brainwashed me." So, two days after his arrival, they detained him and held him in custody for six months.

Nime returned home for good only in 1980. His wife made him swear he would not work for the state again. But his ties with the army personnel continued. "Even today, if they do anything wrong, I go over and give them a smack on the head," he said. I asked whether Tapor had also worked for the intelligence agencies. "Yes," Nime said. The two would speak about it. Was Tapor on the job when he was abducted? "No." Tapor had stopped going after his wife died. "If he's indeed there," Nime added, "the maximum jail term is nine or ten years. There's no death to civil assets. I might die but, you see, he will return."

"The government is only interested in us today because of the China dispute," Diru said. Arunachalis, she added, are tired of being pawns in a geopolitical battle, not a stakeholder in India's growth story.

As we bade him goodbye that night, I noticed a buoyant Diru smiling to herself. Later, she told me that she often daydreams of Tapor's return. "The first thing I'll say is, *'Swagat hai apka apke ghar mein'*"—Welcome to your home. "Then I will hug him such that he forgets his years in captivity."

Tapor will have a lot of catching up to do. With his youngest son, who was only five years old in 2015 and cannot picture his father anymore. With his daughter, who often rued the fact that she never spent enough time with him. Diru and Vicky want to get married, but the traditional way involves a hefty bride price. "This includes 12 mithuns, 17 or 18 pigs, seven kilograms ghee and butter, a hundred kilograms rice, a few dozen litres of rice and millet beer, and ₹50,000 in cash," Diru said, "Perhaps he could help with that."

For the first month, she told me, she would warn everyone not to say a word about China, so that he can process the trauma. "When he is ready, I will want to know everything. Everything from the abduction, jail, if there was torture and how he was released. I will make sure I bring it to the world, so it won't happen again."

All these years, Tapor Pullom has been Diru's quest. In flesh, he will likely be her stubborn, irascible and temperamental father-in-law. "We're both strong personalities," she said. "But I think we'll get along." ■

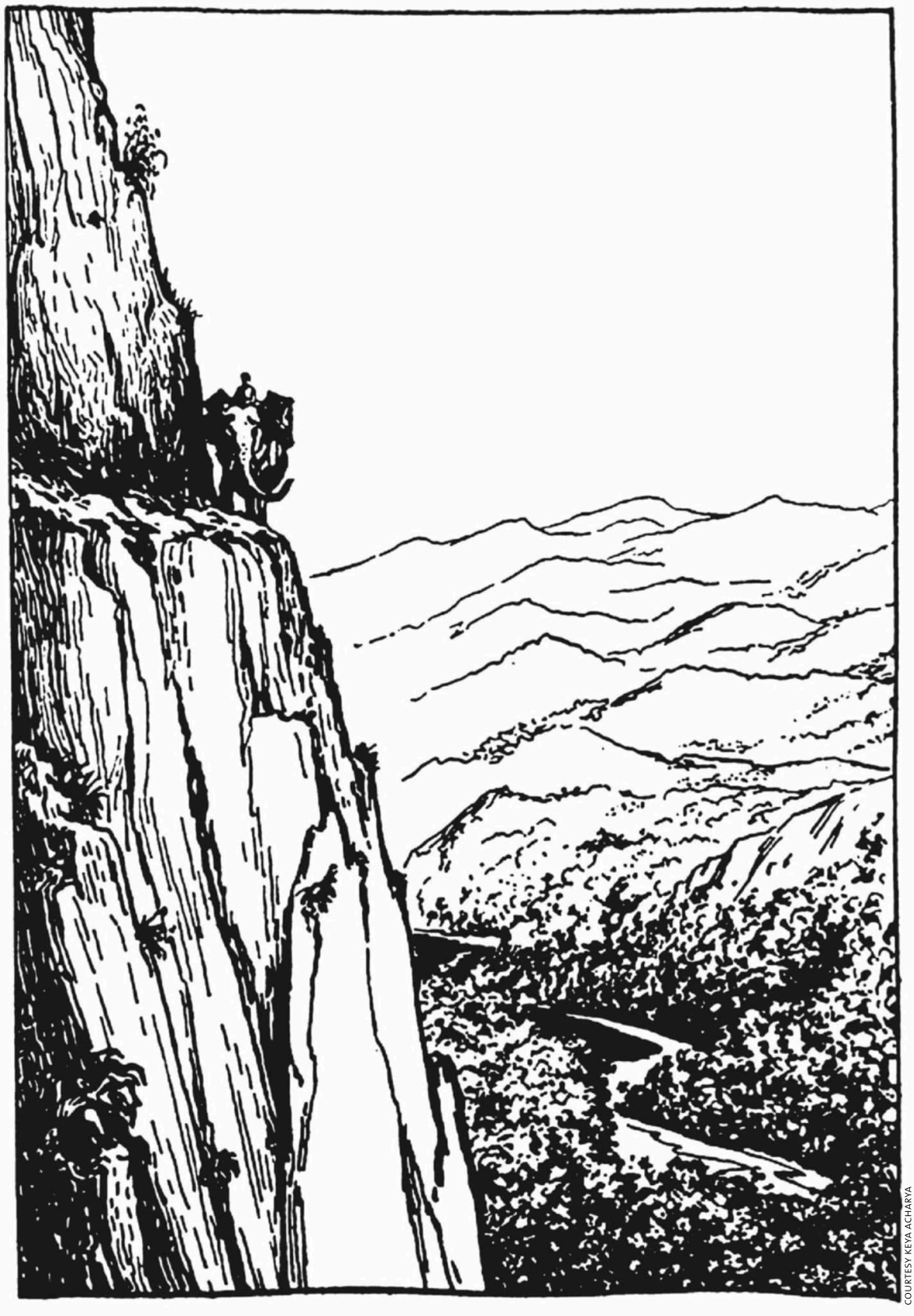
ABOVE: Nime Pullom, uncle of Tapor Pullom, says he spent nine years in a Chinese jail in the 1970s after the PLA captured him while he was on an intel gathering exercise.

The Hannibal of Manipur

Retracing a forgotten wartime march

/ HISTORY

KEYA ACHARYA



COURTESY KEYA ACHARYA

A COLONIAL ENTERPRISE, the Bombay Burmah Trading Company, Limited, was established in 1863. Colonial Burma was the world's largest supplier of teak, and the BBTCL its largest exporter. It was a weighty, influential company, instrumental in felling huge tracts of natural teak forests across the country—in the late 1800s, the British army went to war with the Burmese crown to protect the company's interests. After Burma gained independence, in 1948, the BBTCL withdrew from the country, although export of teak remained legal until 2014. (The company was then sold to an Indian industrialist family, and many decades later, it was acquired by its present owners, the Wadia family.)

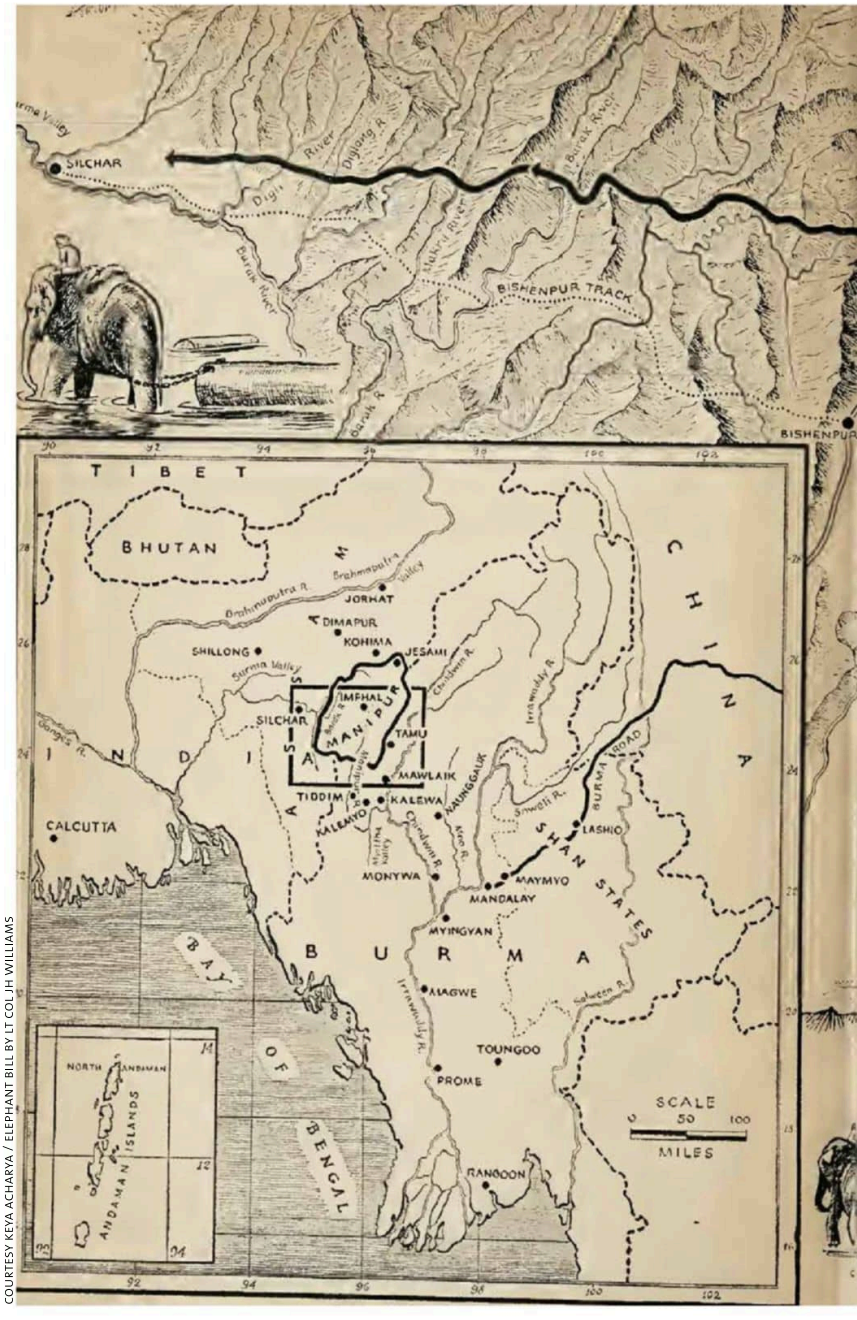
Hidden in this history of the decimation of a colony's natural resources is a remarkable, and sparsely remembered, story of an employee and the elephants he cared for—under the BBTCL at first, and with the British Indian Army during the Second World War—for close to three decades. James Howard Williams, a Cornishman, joined the BBTCL in 1920. He was later seconded into the British Indian Army and made lieutenant colonel. In the army, elephants helped build roads, bridges and, as Field Marshal William Slim, who commanded the British Fourteenth Army during the war, put it, "launched more ships than Helen ever did for Greece." In the early 1940s, the British were losing heavily to the Japanese in large parts of Burma and were particularly struggling near Imphal. Williams' elephants and their Burmese mahouts helped Slim's army halt the Japanese invasion of Burma.

There were no political borders between Burma and India at the time, though there were five treacherously impenetrable mountain ranges that formed a geographical frontier. A two-metre-wide bridle track between Imphal and Tamu was the only land connection between the two colonies. One had to travel up the Chindwin River to Kalewa, and go up the hazardous Kabaw Valley—later dubbed the Valley of Death by the British Indian Army, due to the thousands of refugee deaths there in 1942—to Tamu. Then, across the mountains into what is now Manipur, before reaching the Imphal plains.

Williams undertook two incredible treks along this route, both of which are barely

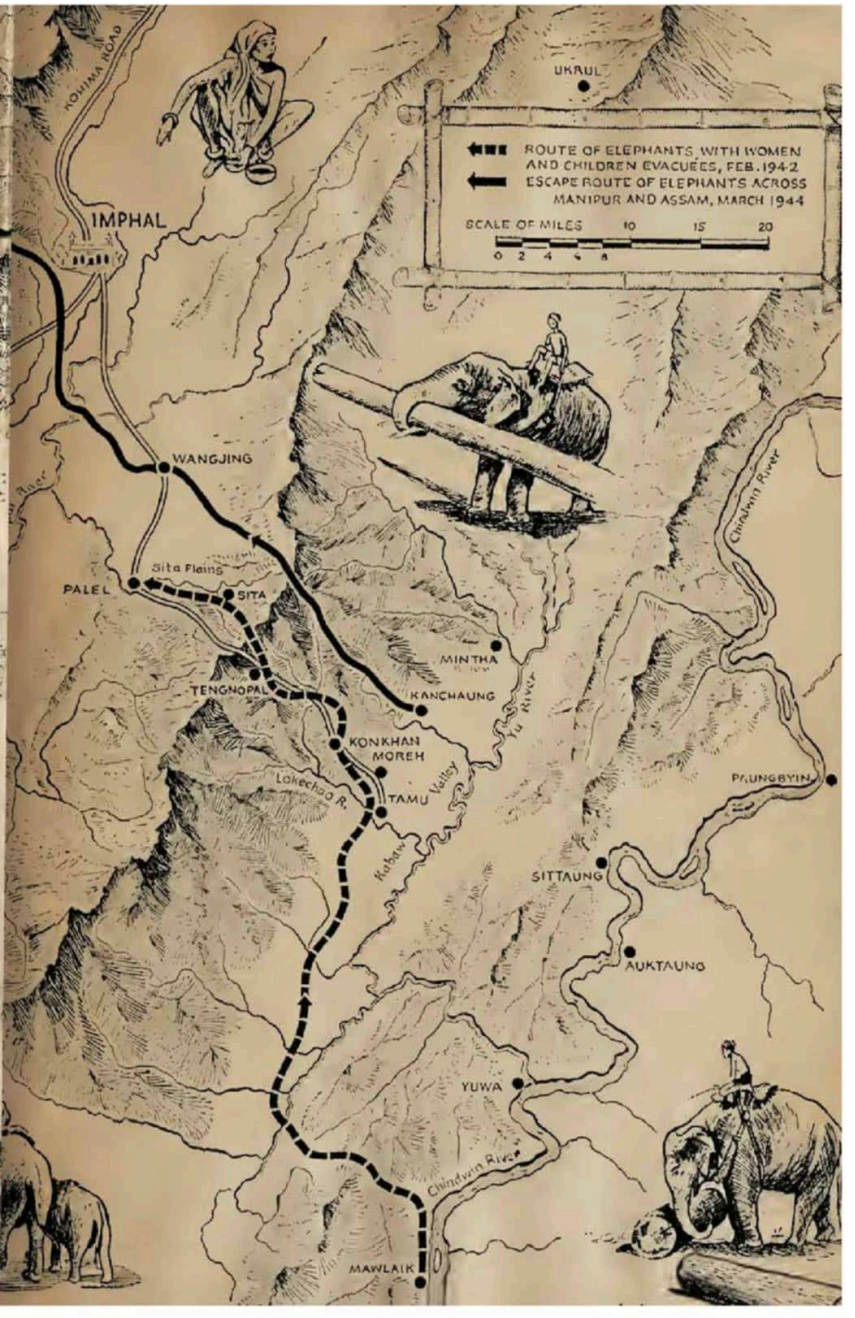
PREVIOUS SPREAD: A sketch by James Howard Williams, of Bandoola, a prized elephant under his care, on the "elephant staircase."

BELOW: A map of Burma in the 1940s. It shows the two incredible treks undertaken by James Howard Williams, through the Burmese jungles and into India, during the Second World War.



COURTESY KEYA ACHARYA / ELEPHANT BILL BY LT COL JH WILLIAMS

Hidden in the history of the decimation of a colony's natural resources is a remarkable, and sparsely remembered, story of an employee and the elephants he cared for, for close to three decades.



documented. The first, in 1942, was part of a larger amnesia surrounding the Indian exodus from Burma during the war. After the Japanese began their invasion, Indians were forced to flee, often through arduous terrain. Official records show that nearly four hundred thousand Indians fled Burma, though the Indian Overseas Department calculated around half a million refugee entrants. The British historian Hugh Tinker notes that as many as a hundred thousand were estimated to have died along the way, of hunger, exhaustion and neglect, although no official count was done.

He writes that this traumatic episode was forgotten over thirty years—India remembered the refugee migration from Pakistan to India during Independence, and the refugee migration from East to West Bengal, but not the Burma influx. Williams, whose own trek to evacuate the families of BBTCL employees coincided with that of the refugees, recorded some of the scenes he witnessed in his memoir *Elephant Bill*—named after a moniker he earned in the Burmese jungles—published in the 1950s.

Williams, a witness to forgotten Indian history, was to become a part of it himself as well. In 1944, he, his elephants and the Burmese mahouts were serving in the British Indian Army, aiding its wartime efforts by supplying teak. As the Japanese closed in, they were forced to flee the jungles. The Cornishman guided Nepali and Indian Gurkha women and children, 45 elephants with eight babies, with 90 mahouts and elephant attenders, and 40 armed Karen tribesmen as guards, through the formidable hills of Manipur, to safety during wartime. Their route included an "elephant staircase," a dangerous rock-face stairway that should have been impossible for elephants to climb.

BIPIN BIHARI KAPUR / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

RIGHT: Residents of Rangoon flee air raids by Japan, circa 1941. Over a million Indians lived in Burma, now Myanmar, at the time. They were forced to flee, often through arduous mountain terrain. According to some estimates, close to a hundred thousand lost their lives.

I came to know of Williams' story about eighty years later, through *Elephant Company*, a 2014 bestseller by Vicky Constantine Croke. Taken in by the incredible story of the 1944 climb, a resident of Ukhrul, in north-western Manipur, to look for the elephant staircase. It took Khaleng a year and three trips in these hills to locate the site.

I visited the region in 2024. The mountain ranges appeared deceptively mild and stoic, hiding the seething ethnic conflict and political mismanagement that had defined Manipur since the previous year. Especially amid the pervasive ethnic resentment, it was moving to remember how this troop was helped by villagers in the hills, irrespective of their race, clan or ethnicity. Helpers in a war that stemmed the Japanese invasion into India, they would be nearly forgotten.

WILLIAMS HAD JOINED the BBTCL after a stint in the First World War, which he spent looking after camels and, later, mules. "I have always got on well with animals," he writes in *Elephant Bill*. "I like them and, with one or two notable exceptions, they always seem to have liked me." After the war, a friend told him how elephants in Burma were being used for teak logging. Not knowing where Burma was, the two had to look it up in an atlas. Williams sent in an application asking to be considered as an elephant manager, and was accepted. He spent the next two decades working in the colony. Within a few years, he was traversing rivers and creeks on foot or on elephant-back, speaking fluent Burmese, coming to know the topography like the back of his hand.

By the Second World War, the BBTCL had close to two thousand elephants, spread across various camps in the jungles. Williams took care of their health, management and handling, overseeing the "oozies," or mahouts—local men from the villages who grew up with elephants and knew how to train them, and who had formed extremely close bonds with the animals. The animals were used for felling and hauling huge teak trees in the forests of northern Burma. They would carry Williams and the mahouts to look for and choose the most suitable tree, which would then be "ringed" with a sharp knife and left to "season" for two years. The elephants would drag these logs to the edge of rivers such as the Irrawaddy, from where they floated downstream, to Rangoon or Man-

dalay. Here, the logs were seasoned further by being dried out, milled into square timber and shipped out, mainly for British shipbuilding, railway tracks and other construction uses in the western world.

Williams loved the elephants, living in the jungles with them, calling the calves his "babies." Every morning, he watched the animals being bathed, then lined up, like an army troop, their black skins scrubbed clean to show the tinge of blue underneath, their tusks freshly polished and gleaming. Even the oozies would be dressed up. Williams checked the animals for wounds from bamboo splinters and logging gear, and properly dressed any he found. He would then open an old logbook with entries for each elephant with their health details, registration numbers and inspection history, including even their date and place of birth. He conducted elephant postmortems, noting down possible preventive remedies learnt from their causes of death, notes he later compiled for the BBTCL.

After the war broke out, teak became "as important a munition of war as steel," Williams writes. "All those employed in its extraction were regarded as engaged in work of national importance." The war came decisively into Burma by late 1941, with Japanese planes bombing Rangoon in December. British defences were weak, and falling fast. Burma was crucial to the Japanese, since it could allow access to more ammunition and fuel, and for its strategic location next to India. The strong resentment against British rule had led the Japanese to hope that they could unseat India's colonial rulers.

The BBTCL, meanwhile, feared it would be caught in the crossfire. Williams was flung into action, tasked by the company in February 1942 to evacuate the families of European employees from the logging camps, together with over a hundred elephants, whom the company wanted to save from falling into Japanese control. The group was divided into two, with Williams leading one batch—22 women, 15 children, 83 men, riders, servants and bearers, plus 56 elephants, including 18 males. They took the company steamer from Rangoon, up the Chindwin, to Mawlaik, in north Burma. From here, they hiked to Tamu, taking six days, and eventually to Palel, in the Imphal Valley, over treacherous mountain terrain. The trek came up alongside thousands of refugees, mostly of Indian origin, desperately following the same route to escape Japanese raids.

For its scale, the Indian exodus from Burma during the Japanese offensive is hardly remembered. Tinker writes there were over a million Indians living in Burma in 1941, many of them in administrative posts. In an attempt to keep their systems from collapsing, the British barred Indians from leaving by the sea route, promising them safety if they returned to their jobs. By early 1942, the British defence had crumbled. Rangoon was captured in March 1942.

By this time, the colonial government had helped evacuate seventy thousand Indians by sea and nearly five thousand by air. But the ships leaving from Rangoon were prohibited from selling cheaper deck tickets to Indians. Sea travel became restricted to only rich Indians and British expatriates. Masses of Indians were left abandoned in camps in Rangoon, amid screaming air raids, surrounded by putrefying corpses. Exhaustion, mosquitoes, hunger and unpotable drinking water led to mass deaths.

Hundreds of thousands of Indians tried to desperately flee via Taungup, by any means possible: bullock cart, bicycle, truck, bus and on foot. Masses trekked first to Mandalay and then, when Mandalay fell, turned to the Tamu route, relying on permissions from camp in-charges and local villagers for escape routes through the difficult mountain terrain. Another route, higher north, through the Hukawng Valley to Ledo, in present-day Assam, was even more hazardous. Plagued by exhaustion, lashing rains and disease, thousands lost their lives. Overall, "it was the largest migration of people in history up to that point," Croke writes. "Eighty thousand may have died in the effort."

Williams's British evacuees, by comparison, were a relatively fortunate lot, thanks to luck intertwined with straightforward racial privilege. Williams passed fleeing refugees, finding that the road "was full of tragedy and tears." He met an Anglo-Indian man, delirious with fever, asking if he had seen a little boy on the road. The man had carried his son, dying of pneumonia, while his wife carried their daughter, until the wife collapsed. Being confronted with a choice of whom to carry, the father left the dying boy and carried the girl, and was haunted by the thought that the boy might still be alive. Williams found out later that both the man and his wife died of pneumonia.

Williams' first trek, in 1942, became part of a larger amnesia, surrounding the Indian exodus from Burma during the war. After the Japanese began their invasion, Indians were forced to flee, often through arduous terrain.

He also came upon two sobbing children—a girl of about seven and a boy of four—and their young Indian mother lying on the bank, dying of thirst, hunger and exhaustion. Unable to do anything to help, he gave her a drink from his water bottle. While looking at her kids in despair, he turned around again to find she had died. Williams carried the boy on his shoulder, and holding the girl's hand, walked over a kilometre, till he came upon an army jeep. He begged the officer in it to take the two kids to an evacuee camp in Imphal. "I think if he had refused, I would have tried to shove his car off the road, down the khudside"—the deep ravine—Williams recalls. He checked up on them at his second crossing to Imphal—to his relief, they were being looked after.

His elephants had been equally distressed at the chaos of this expedition, running amok, with one trampling a camp worker to death and some running off into surrounding jungles. At one point, Williams sent all the males back to the jungles of Tamu with their mahouts, leaving 33 young females with him. He then led his group to Palel, on the Indian side, where the families were sent by army trucks to the Imphal station and then to Dimapur. After a few days' rest, Williams trekked with the elephants back to Burma.

"WITH THE FALL OF BURMA, the demand for timber in India became of increasing importance," Williams writes. For several months, he was employed by the Assam government, for timber surveys in Bengal and Assam and to raise a labour corps.

News of Williams's expertise with elephants had reached the ears of the British Indian Army. In October 1942, at the request of the commanding officer of the Eastern Army—later known as the Fourteenth Army—Williams joined the Fourth Corps headquarters in Jorhat, in Assam. Because of his deep knowledge of Burma and its topography, he was placed in the intelligence division, given the rank of lieutenant colonel and called "elephant adviser," even though the army had no elephants at the time. Familiar with the Burmese terrain and language, he became a resource for the army—"a room was promptly secured in which to install me as a living ready reference library," he writes.

Yet, he yearned to return to the jungle and to the men and animals he had spent over twenty years with. "The Japanese had not penetrated as far as Tamu, and Williams wanted to get back there 'to find out if there are any elephants not yet in the hands of the Japs,'" Croke writes. "If I could have laid my hands on a hundred of my timber elephants, I have no doubt my war job would have been the extraction of timber in Assam," Williams writes. "But I could not, and I felt a gnawing ache to get back to those we had left behind in Burma. The Japanese invasion of the Kabaw Valley had stopped short of Tamu. I knew well that once we advanced down that new road elephants and their oozies would play a big part."

Williams boldly approached the commander and secured himself a jeep, and the freedom to corral elephants for the army. To help his efforts, he recruited Harold Browne, a former forest assistant, and Stanley White, a river captain of the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company before the war. They made their way back into Burma, passing via Tamu. The town was littered with abandoned cars, lorries and buses, left behind by Indian refugees. These had served as shelters while Williams was on his way out, but they were now filled with grisly figures of the dead, unbelievably emaciated, some still with rags on them, some bent, some rigid in their seats, some behind steering wheels, gazing through windscreens with only sockets for eyes. Particularly prominent was a military ambulance with four stretchers, each with a skeleton on it. The ambulance had developed engine trouble and its inmates had

Taken in by the incredible story of the 1944 climb, a friend contacted Yureihor Khaleng, a resident of Manipur, to search for this "elephant route," which included a dangerous rock face stairway that should have been impossible for elephants to climb. It took Khaleng a year and three trips to these hills to locate the site.

OPPOSITE PAGE:
A newspaper clipping from the Second World War.

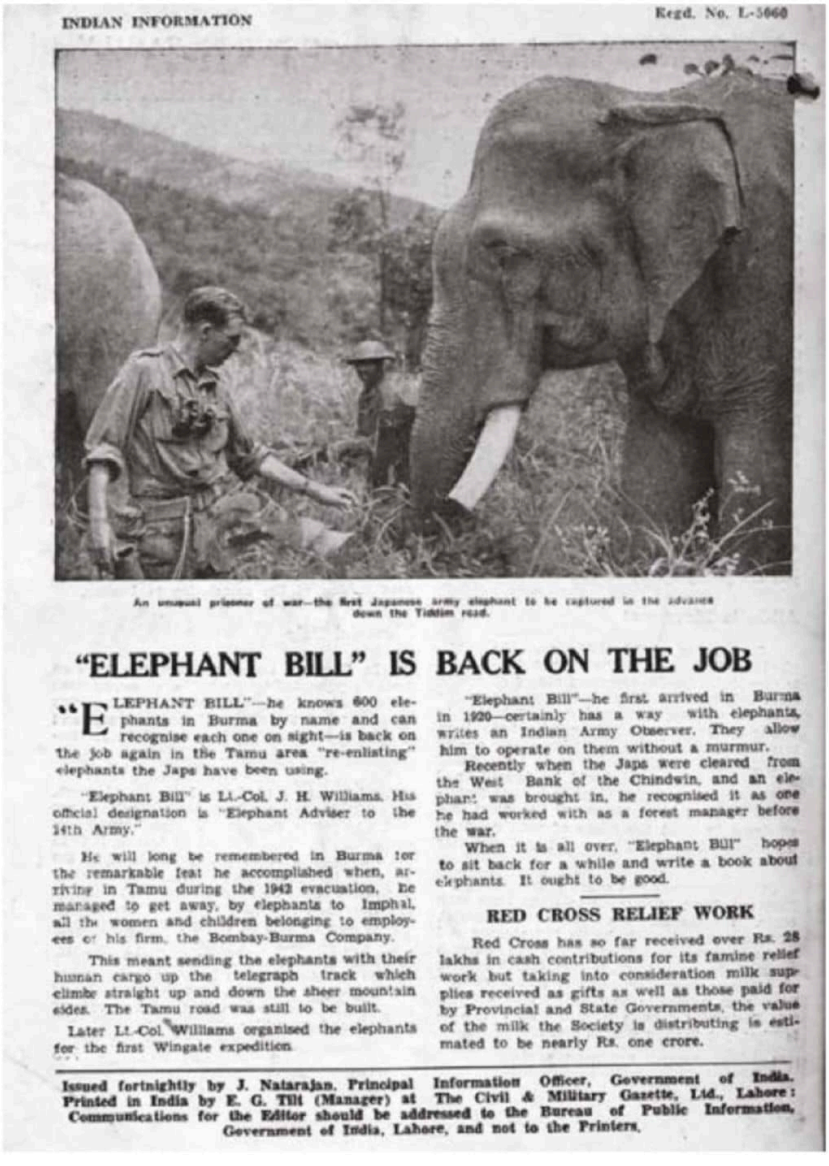
transferred to another vehicle—the skeletons were evidently later entrants looking for shelter. Browne torched all these vehicles and any more found on their way, cremating the human remains.

Back in the Burmese jungles, Williams was on the lookout for a special elephant that had gone missing in the early confusion of the war. Bandoola, named after a famous Burmese general who was killed in the First Anglo-Burmese War, in 1825, was an intelligent, magnificent male, weighing over five thousand kilograms. He was born in a BBT-CL camp under Williams' care. Williams and Browne established contact with Bandoola's oozie, Po Toke, and, together, with the help of an Anglo-Indian officer, they managed to locate the elephant deep in the forests. The elephant was soon to become a war hero.

Trekking into jungles with well-hidden villages, Williams collected a total of 43 elephants and 49 mahouts as the first lot for Elephant Company Number 1, established in Moreh, near Tamu. "There were patrol clashes with the enemy throughout the hot weather of 1943. Seventeen elephants were captured, bringing our strength up to fifty-seven animals," he writes. "By that time elephants had established their reputation in the military mind as bridge builders and road makers of immense value. We built bridges along the three roads in the Kabaw Valley, where we had only two brigades, thinly spread over the ground, to guard the gateway to Imphal." But the animals were overworked and badly treated—tied to trees for hours on end, not given adequate water or fodder. Williams's anguish is underlying in his account of their state in *Elephant Bill*. It got so bad, he writes, that he sent out a manual on elephant care and treatment, refusing to supply elephants to any troops who did not cooperate. Often, the army showed signs of wanting to retreat, but Williams fought back, unwilling to leave behind his elephants and the Burmese families that lived and worked in these camps.

In March 1944, Japanese troops launched a three-pronged offensive at the Chin Hills, Tamu and Kohima. In the midst of this onslaught, Williams was ordered to immediately evacuate all elephants to Imphal—the army could not risk letting these high-value assets fall into Japanese hands. He collected as many as he could into two camps, but one was ambushed, and the experienced mahouts ran off with their charges into the jungles. Left with 45 elephants, Williams began marching towards Imphal. He decided to send his mahouts' families to the Manipur Railways evacuee camp, promising that they would be looked after.

But, as in all war zones, his circumstances changed en route. He was joined by 64 "strange" women and children at a camp in the outskirts of Imphal—the group, Gurkha families from the Chin hills, had been rescued by the British, but "nobody had any time to deal with



INDIAN INFORMATION

Regd. No. L-5660

An unusual prisoner of war—the first Japanese army elephant to be captured in the advance down the Tiddim road.

"ELEPHANT BILL" IS BACK ON THE JOB

"ELEPHANT BILL"—he knows 600 elephants in Burma by name and can recognise each one on sight—is back on the job again in the Tamu area "re-enlisting" elephants the Japs have been using.

"Elephant Bill" is Lt.-Col. J. H. Williams. His official designation is "Elephant Adviser to the 14th Army."

He will long be remembered in Burma for the remarkable feat he accomplished when, arriving in Tamu during the 1942 evacuation, he managed to get away, by elephants to Imphal, all the women and children belonging to employees of his firm, the Bombay-Burma Company.

This meant sending the elephants with their human cargo up the telegraph track which climbs straight up and down the sheer mountain sides. The Tamu road was still to be built.

Later Lt.-Col. Williams organised the elephants for the first Wingate expedition.

"Elephant Bill"—he first arrived in Burma in 1929—certainly has a way with elephants, writes an Indian Army Observer. They allow him to operate on them without a murmur.

Recently when the Japs were cleared from the West Bank of the Chindwin, and an elephant was brought in, he recognised it as one he had worked with as a forest manager before the war.

When it is all over, "Elephant Bill" hopes to sit back for a while and write a book about elephants. It ought to be good.

RED CROSS RELIEF WORK

Red Cross has so far received over Rs. 28 lakhs in cash contributions for its famine relief work but taking into consideration milk supplies received as gifts as well as those paid for by Provincial and State Governments, the value of the milk the Society is distributing is estimated to be nearly Rs. one crore.

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COURTESY KEYA ACHARYA / ELEPHANT COMPANY BY VICKI CONSTANTINE CROKE

LOOK AND LEARN / BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

them," Williams writes. He decided to take them along. His decision was unpopular among the Burmese mahouts, who had to leave their own families behind while taking strangers with them, but their spirits were unwavering.

There was no other route from Imphal into the Surma Valley, in Assam, except for hacking through the five mountain ranges. Eight decades later, Khaleng, the Manipur resident, found these to be the Bishenpur hill range; the Haochong hill range; the Lukhambji hill range; the Panki, or Khepuching, the highest and most prominent of the lot; and finally, the Zeilad. At points, the route was as high as the Alps that the Carthaginian general Hannibal led his elephants through while invading the Roman Republic.

The terrain was wild, rugged and unfamiliar, but Williams suspected that following the river Barak would ensure plenty of water and grass fodder for elephants. From the river, they could reach the safety of the Baladun tea estate, marked on an old army map he had. Williams was to, however, stop at the British administrative headquarters at Tamenglong, at about fifteen hundred metres above sea level, which came after the Panki range, and report back to headquarters on his status. His plan was audacious, and few thought it achievable. Before he departed, a fellow officer told him he would "rather stay here and starve." Another gave him a case of rum, saying, "Say nothing, Bill. If there's nothing else you'll need on this Hannibal trek, you'll need this."

THE CREW DEPARTED at dawn on 5 April 1944. "Our total strength was forty-five elephants, forty armed Karens"—a hill tribe that had lost many of its elephants to the Japanese—"ninety elephant riders and attendants, sixty-four refugee women and children, and four officers in charge," Williams writes. Alongside him were Browne, White and CW Hann—another officer familiar with the animals and the terrain. "The cheerfulness of the Burmans was a great encouragement and, provided that we escaped being attacked by Japanese patrols, we felt confident we should make the Surma Valley sometime and somehow."

Their first leg was a climb over the Bishenpur range from Imphal to the Iring River, below Noney. The group encountered dense bamboo thickets and tall razor-sharp grasses at eye level. The younger women had to slash a path ahead. After a day's rest near the Iring, the group climbed higher and higher from daybreak to sundown, slashing their dirt track way forward, exhausted and hungry, but without a hint of a complaint. As they went higher, the cold was compounded by lashing rains. Cold, with sore, blistered feet, many wom-

en and children fell ill. Malaria surged, as did dysentery, pneumonia and breast abscesses in breastfeeding women. Williams now had sick people to tend to as well as sick elephants, but could not afford to give anyone a day's rest, for fear of a Japanese ambush.

But the women remained stoic, the men calm, focussed on caring for their tired elephants, now carrying sick women and children on their backs. The mothers, worried their children would fall off the elephants, were happy to see how well the mahouts looked after the kids in their care. Williams notes that everyone, including women, seemed unbothered by embarassment, shedding their clothing when it hampered their walking.

Williams, mindful that he needed to get to Tamenglong to radio an update to headquarters, branched off with White after Haochang. After nine consecutive days of marching, the two bifurcated parties met at the village of Khepuching, a few hundred metres below Panki's highest peak. The group was happy to camp while Williams went looking for a way to the top of the mountain. He struggled up, climbing upward for over three kilometres through very dense bamboo jungle, realising that the elephants would be both exhausted and slow climbing up.

Suddenly, he came up against a sheer rock wall, a "perpendicular cliff," as he calls it, around a hundred metres high, and nearly two kilometres long, with not so much as a chink in it to pass through. His heart sank. "There was not a single place where I could have possibly climbed it myself. There was no question of an elephant climbing a perpendicular cliff," he writes.

Then, he came upon a clump of bamboo that had obviously been cut with a knife, possibly a year before. Realising then that the local Chin villagers were familiar with the place, he guessed they used some method of climbing to the top. He looked harder, and, sure enough, there was a place where there had been a thin landslip in the escarpment, proving men had climbed down from the top. But how would the elephants manage? Williams marked the area and retraced his steps back to camp.

There were hoops of relief when Williams told his group they could have two days at the village site before crossing. He then quietly told Browne of the insurmountable escarpment and the landslip strip. The next morning, Hann, White and Browne, each with assistants, went off in different directions, examining the foot of the escarpment. Williams stayed behind, lobbing grenades into the nearby river to kill fish. Browne, who was both athletic and tough, came back with two spear-armed villagers to say that he had climbed up the landslip point to the top of the ridge. Chin villagers had evidently used it at some point, because there were signs of an abandoned village at the top.

However, nearer the top, the rock turned into a narrow ledge, with a sheer cliff both above and below it. Browne climbed to the top and noted that there was a fairly good path leading down to join the Bishenpur track on the other side, although Williams knew it was overrun with Japanese and, therefore, out of the question. The next day, the officers took their head elephant-men to see the track. Both because he was afraid of heights, and because the path was treacherous, Williams crawled on all fours in certain parts. "The question was whether elephants would face it. In some places it was so steep that the elephants would almost be standing on their hind legs," Williams wrote. Po Toke was decisive. "Bandoola will lead, and if he won't face it, no elephant will. He knows how to close his eye on the khudside, and won't put his foot on anything that will give way," he said.

The following morning, every fit person in the group, together with a dozen villagers from Khepuching, were divided into four groups and set to work on different sections of the proposed path. The whole of the inner wall of the track had to be cleared of jungle, and the path itself had to be cut out to its maximum width. Fortunately, Williams notes, it was sandstone

Suddenly, he came up against a sheer rock wall, around a hundred metres high, and nearly two kilometres long. His heart sank. "There was no question of an elephant climbing a perpendicular cliff," he writes.

OPPOSITE PAGE:
Elephants hauling teak logs in the Burmese forest. This photograph was taken circa 1920.

and could therefore be cut into with some ease. The evacuees carved the steep ledge, at three-quarters of the way up, into a series of steps, an "elephants' stairway"—just wide enough to fit an elephant's foot, with sheer wall on the inner side and another sheer drop on the opposite side. Williams worried whether it would carry the weight of 45 adult elephants. But, at the end of the second day, the stairway was as ready as it could get. The elephants would go first, followed by the fit. Those that needed help would be carried, and no children were to be allowed on elephant-back. There was to be a strict silence. Elephants are known to march very silently, so there was no issue on this front.

With Japanese gunfire within earshot, about a day's trek away, Williams was the first to lead the group at daybreak, scrambling, sometimes crawling to the stone steps, to wait for the elephants. Sitting quietly, he even managed to carve an elephant on a stone.

"Bandoola's head and tusks suddenly came round the corner below me. He looked almost as though he were standing on his hind legs," he writes. "Then up came his hindquarters as though in a slow-motion picture. The oozie was sitting on his head and, looking down, seemed to be directing the elephant where to place each of his feet. Then he had passed that worst place." Po Toke was following the magnificent animal, and gave Williams a look, as if to say "They'll all follow now."

Williams, an artist too, later made a sketch of this poignant moment—Bandoola appearing at the turn below him, graceful and big, seemingly stoic despite the drop to his left. It took over two hours for him to finally reach the top, the other elephants following, their flanks quivering for hours with the strain.

The elephants, the calves, the refugees, the Karen men, the Burmese mahouts and attenders, and the officers reached the top of Panki, over five thousand meters above sea level, by evening, without a single casualty. Not one elephant refused to climb, eventually climbing higher than Hannibal's elephants had done. Everybody rested on the ridge top for the night, before making their way down to the Barak Valley over the easier last range, Zeilad. "I learned more about what elephants could be ... in that one day than I had in twenty-four years," Williams writes.

Once down, Williams chose a riverbank space near the Jiri river, close to present-day Jiribam, for his entourage to camp. Relief flooded the crowd, human and animal. The elephants had enough water to drink and bathe at the river, as did everyone else. Williams then set off on foot to locate the Baladan tea estate. Luckily, he soon heard a Scottish voice calling out to him—that of James Sinclair, the manager of the estate, who was standing at his bungalow verandah, mistaking Williams for an intelligence officer from nearby Silchar.

Sinclair allowed his group, including the elephants, to camp in his garden. The sick were attended to at Labac Garden Hospital, renowned even then because of the groundbreaking research on malarial mosquitos being conducted there. Williams arranged military transport to drop his refugee group to a military camp in Silchar. Sinclair hosted the four officers in his bungalow, while some of the group camped at Baladan for four months, resting and regaining their health. Some of the elephants gleefully ran off into the jungles.

Williams' first exercise on contacting the army at Silchar was to locate the families of his elephant-attenders, who were discovered at a camp in Parbatipur, on the banks of the Brahmaputra, where they had been treated with hospitality and fascination. The Burmese women had even set up their looms and were trading in Shan handwoven silks and cotton bags. Soon, the families were reunited.

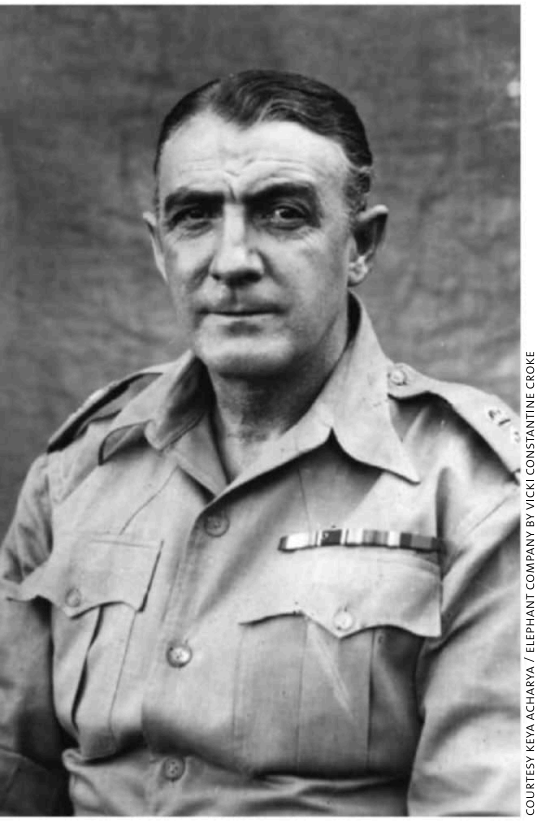
Williams, too, was finally able to see his family. He went to them in Shillong, then got an ulcer operation, and recuperated for six weeks. He battled the transfer of his elephants into the Indian Army, moving his group back into Burma after their four-month rest. Their work was historic, building, apart from 270 bridges, the largest known Bailey bridge across the Chindwin in Kalewa, which proved decisive in defeating the Japanese in Burma and preventing them from entering the Indian side. Had it not been for Williams's group and their effort to save the elephants from Japanese capture, India's history might well have been written differently.

IN JUNE 2022, while I was convalescing after a surgery, my friend, the well-known environmentalist Almitra Patel, sent me *Elephant Company* as a diversion. I was thrilled by Croke's dramatic retelling of this adventure and by the idea that this location of war history was lost somewhere in the hills of Manipur. Finding our interest in the book's subject similar, Patel contacted Croke and a drone expert to see if we could locate the stairway. But Croke did not know the exact location, while the drone showed only dense bamboo jungle.

Patel then contacted Yureihor Khaleng, the head of the Socio Economic Action Trust, an NGO based in Manipur's Ukhrul village. She offered him financial support to look for the stairway. Khaleng hails from the Tangkhul Naga community, one of the ethnic sub-sects of the Nagas in Manipur. An adventurer at heart, he gladly took on Patel's request.

From July to early October 2022, Khaleng undertook three journeys in all, looking for that stairway. The first one was a reconnaissance trip from Imphal to Tamenlong by road, studying the topography, coinciding

Po Toke was decisive. "Bandoola will lead, and if he won't face it, no elephant will. He knows how to close his eye on the khudside, and won't put his foot on anything that will give way," he said.



COURTESY KEYA ACHARYA / ELEPHANT COMPANY BY VICKI CONSTANTINE CROKE

ABOVE: A portrait of James Howard Williams, during his stint in the British army.

Williams' journey with Croke's account, stopping at villages mentioned in the book—this is how we realised the errors in Williams' records of the village names. He enlisted a friend from Tamenglong, 45-year-old Dimrei Kamei. Both hiked down from Tamenglong to the Bishenpur track in the plains.

On the second attempt, ten days later, Khaleng and Kamei trekked up an old dirt track from Imphal up to Haochong, in Noney district. With an additional four volunteers, he trekked with his group for two hours up the hills, but found no sign of a stairway or a steep climb. But interaction with local villagers proved useful. Four villagers from Khepuching, two men and two women, all in their nineties, recalled an elephant convoy going through the village just before the Japanese entered Haochong. There were more indications that they were on the right track: the villagers told him that this particular mule path was the only route to Tamenglong, until the 1980s. Today, there is a road, albeit very bad, being constructed in piecemeal fashion, with the last stretch up to Tamenglong ready as a modern national highway. Administrative officials and others still use the helicopter service from Imphal to Tamenglong.

Khaleng's third climb, from Khepuching village, in 2022, was then successful. Climbing steadily from early morning till they reached midway in about three hours, the group rested, removing leeches from their bodies, swatting mosquitoes and eating their packed lunch of rice and dal. Khaleng ticked off the similarities to Williams' account: the steep, terrifying drop on the left, the narrow ledge at one point, where Williams, afraid of heights, had to crawl, and the rough staircase-like steps zigzagging up the cliff, clearly visible from several locations. Most cinching of all was a rock Khaleng found, now covered with moss. He could see an elephant-like drawing engraved on it. It was certain Williams had sat here and waited here for his elephants to come up. The top of the ridge, Khaleng told me, was about ten metres wide and half a kilometre long; it must have been a tight fit for elephant and humans, but it was enough to house Williams's entire group of men, women, children and elephants for the night.

Two years later, in November 2024, going up the hills following Williams' story, I stopped at Khepuching. The village, earlier called Puching, was then higher up near the foot of the Panki peak, where Williams' group had halted for two days trying to figure a way up to the top. The group assembled related the stories they had heard, of the elephants having eaten and destroyed their banana groves, of there being a long, heavy metal chain, probably used to secure the elephants, in the next village.

At a homestay in Tamenglong, I met a former pastor, a teacher and a social activist, all in their eighties or nineties. They told me they would traverse these difficult ranges as young adolescents in the late 1940s, trekking to Silchar from Tamenlong to barter *umpok*—Manipur's fiery red chillies—for forty-kilogram salt sacks on their backs. There were no roads; only dirt tracks over the mountains. Travelling in batches with one strongman as leader, they would leave food at three places en route to cook on their return journey. They

did not, however, take the Khepuching route, known for its challenges. "It was a happy journey, singing, dancing and fireside stories," Luniang Pamei, the teacher, told me.

There is no happy story or dancing together in the area today. Amid the ongoing ethnic violence, the resentment of the hill clans against the dominant Meitei runs deep. Hill voices are not heard, they told me, because the Meitei have a majority in the state legislature. The hills provide the ecological sustenance

OPPOSITE PAGE: The mountain ranges Williams' group trekked through, in present-day Manipur.

In Khaleng's view, making the route and the staircase a well-maintained adventure tourist site for today's youth could help young Manipuris, growing up in deep conflict, to remember their heritage.

that the Imphal Plain uses—natural resources, water, clean air—but get little or nothing in return. Every person I met in Manipur needed to know a person's ethnicity before speaking to them. Jiribam, once the seat of joy and freedom for Williams's group, is mired in ethnic killings. And there are no longer any elephants in Manipur, or even in Cachar.

Families in Tamenglong want their youth to return to their homeland, but the lack of employment opportunities is visible everywhere. Roads are practically non-existent. Even Imphal does not have rail connectivity. The area's first ever railway is currently being constructed, seemingly haphazardly—there is gaping ecological destruction in pristine forest areas where rail tracks are in construction. The deputy commissioner of Tamenglong, L Angshim Dangshawa, spoke of his inability to address the improvement needed in the district, with the Bharatiya Janata Party union government holding both purse strings and power. "Unfortunately, even for innovation you need resources," he said. "It's very restricted now." On paper, he said, money had been allocated for roads, which are supposed to be constructed, but travelling in the area revealed otherwise.

Williams received an OBE for his services but is largely forgotten in Indian war history, and in Manipur itself. The founder of the Imphal Peace Museum, Yumnam Rajeshwor Singh, who is also the founder-president of the WW2 Imphal Campaign Foundation—which commemorates Manipur's role in the battles of Imphal and Kohima—said that Williams's heroic feat does not figure in the museum's commemoration. "These are small incidents; we look at the larger picture," he told me. Khaleng felt differently. In his view, making the route and the staircase a well-maintained adventure tourist site for today's youth could help young Manipuris, growing up in deep conflict, to remember their heritage.

Sometime after returning to Burma from Assam, Williams went to say goodbye to his beloved elephants and to Bandoola. With a gnawing heart at leaving his elephants and Burma behind, he said his farewell to Bandoola, watching him noisily eat his tamarind treat. He rubbed his great flanks, commanding him with a *htah*. For a final time, the great tusker slowly stood up.

Tragically, Bandoola did not live his elephant years. He was killed shortly after the war, found in the forest with a bullet in his head. Williams became crazed with grief and began suspecting Po Toke of killing the elephant, out of jealousy that he would now be retired and Bandoola would have a new mahout. The mystery of his killing was never solved, and all Williams could do was keep one of Bandoola's tusks in his memory.

Today, nothing remains of Sinclair's bungalow. Baladun itself has merged with the Burtoll tea garden, with no remaining vestiges of Williams' sojourn there. I met Jogesh Sathi, a 90-year-old, who was a young boy when Williams' elephants arrived. Sitting beside the road to Jiribam, now tarred, and just below the half-ploughed hillock where Sinclair's bungalow stood, Sathi pointed to a dense clump of bamboo and jungle, sloping downwards into a now-unseen small valley. "The elephants stayed there," he said. There was plenty of fodder, bananas and bamboo clumps for the elephants. Those that ran off into the surrounding jungles bothered the tea plantations for years to come, destroying crops and crushing the bushes, he said. The area looked as wild as it probably did over eighty years ago—Williams loomed large in memory while standing at that half-eaten hillside.

Williams left Burma with his family in 1946. Decades later, his son Treve, a renowned equine veterinarian in Australia, and now in his eightes, handed Croke a worn, old suitcase of documents belonging to his father. Williams, too, sadly did not live out his years, dying at sixty during an emergency appendectomy. Croke writes that Williams probably mistook the pain as his ulcer problem, adding that "the man who never spoke of his woes stoically bore the pain of a burst appendix until it was too late." ■

COURTESY KEYA ACHARYA

BOOKS

A GLARING OMISSION

What Arun Shourie's take on Savarkar fails to admit

/ POLITICS

DHIRENDRA K JHA

THE QUESTION of political transformation does not only beleaguer VD Savarkar, it turns out. In trying to answer this question apropos the Hindutva proponent in his recent book, *The New Icon: Savarkar and the Facts*, Arun Shourie, a journalist and former member of the Bharatiya Janata Party, provokes a similar question about himself. His decimation of Savarkar in this meticulously researched book comes after decades of defending the Savarkarite imagination of state and power. But at no point in the book does he address his own transformation.

Shourie's silence on this vital question makes it difficult to read his book without qualms. The question is necessary to flag, as Savarkar's Hindutva is now the unofficial ideology of the Indian government and Shourie himself served its forces for decades as one of their leaders. Therefore, an explanation of what caused his disillusionment—if this is, in fact, the case—was essential to the book.

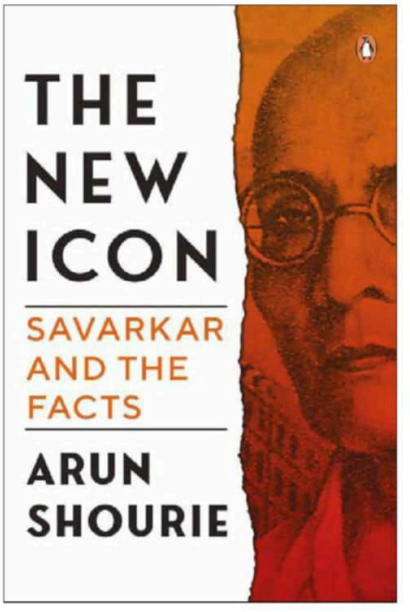
OPPOSITE PAGE: A statue of Savarkar in Maharashtra. There has been a spate of biographical writing on Savarkar over the past decade. Most of these are hagiographies, but even those that are not could not entirely avoid treating Savarkar reverently or believing what he wrote about himself rather than exploring independent and more reliable primary sources.

R MODI / DINODIA PHOTO

Unlike standard biographies, *The New Icon* does not begin at the beginning and end at the end, instead taking episodic leaps back and forth across thematic concerns. The logical lines that Shourie pursues largely lead him to well-founded conclusions, although there are certain slips.

Perhaps the strongest part of the book, in terms of detail and sourcing, is the section that deals with a transformed Savarkar, after he became a British collaborator following his release from jail. Prior to that, while studying law in London, Savarkar had been fiercely anti-British. In 1911, he was arrested in a murder case, tried in India, handed a double life sentence and incarcerated in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. He secured his release, in 1924, after writing a series of mercy petitions to the colonial authorities, making abject appeals and pledging loyalty, obedience and good behaviour in return for clemency. Months before his release from prison, he penned a slim book, *Essentials of Hindutva*, the central concept of which was to exclude Muslims by claiming that Hindus constituted the nation as they alone considered the territory of India to be sacred.

Shourie issues a rebuttal to Savarkar's admirers, who claim that his mercy petitions were a mere tactical ploy so that he could leave jail and resume the anti-British struggle. Savarkar "did what he had pledged to do—that is, to be of use to the British," Shourie writes. "He formulated the two-nation theory—which was ever so convenient for the British. He denounced the Congress at every turn—which was ever so convenient for the British. He hurled pejoratives at Gandhiji—which was ever so convenient for the British. He poured scorn at the 'Quit India' movement—which was ever so convenient for the British. [And] he supported the British in their war effort—which was ever so convenient for the British."



Arun Shourie's decimation of Savarkar in his meticulously researched book, The New Icon, comes after decades of defending the Savarkarite imagination of state and power.

Shourie elaborates on the last statement by going beyond secondary sources. He ploughs through the archives of the British government, citing the correspondence of the viceroy during the Second World War, Linlithgow, with Savarkar and other Hindu Mahasabha leaders to show how eager the Hindutva ideologue was to seize the opportunity of collaborating with the British at a time when the Congress was adamant that Indian participation in the war should be contingent on independence at its conclusion. "What Savarkar said in private to the Viceroy and his demeanour were very different from the uncompromising tone he adopted in public," Shourie writes.

Linlithgow wrote to London that Savarkar and his friends, anticipating a civil war, favoured the perpetuation of British rule. "He [Savarkar] and his friends, were uncertain whether, if His Majesty's Government were to drop out of control in this country, it would be possible to get through without a civil war which in fact they were disposed to anticipate, and in these circumstances they were strongly in favour of a scheme which would retain His Majesty's Government as an effective element," Shourie writes, quoting Linlithgow's account of a meeting with Savarkar.

Shourie points out the servile position Savarkar was ready to assume. "He—and I am using the word that Linlithgow uses twice to describe how Savarkar put the request—'begs' the Viceroy to consider inducting Hindu Mahasabha nominees into responsible positions in Government in place of Congressmen," he writes. Shourie also describes how Savarkar threw himself into the war efforts of the colonial government by exhorting

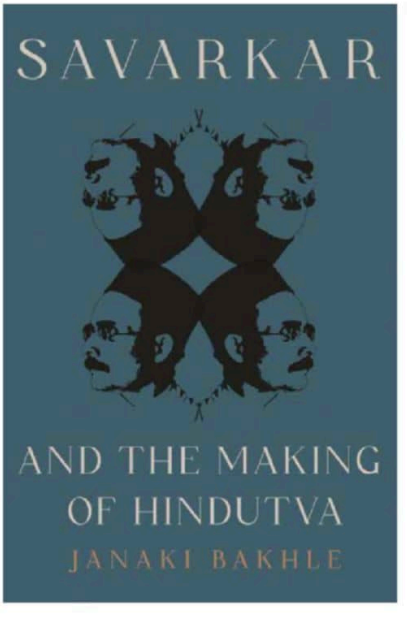
Hindus to join armed forces, in a letter to Linlithgow:

> The Hindu Mahasabha has given in unambiguous terms a lead to the Hindu people to fight in the cause of Indian Defence in this war. Its leaders are touring throughout India to whip up military enthusiasm and spirit in the Hindu public. It has set up 'Hindu Militarisation Mandals' throughout India. Some of these are doing excellent work and thousands of Hindus have already joined the rank and file of the Indian forces in all branches.

Not since the Italian scholar Marzia Casolari described Savarkar's collaborationist role on the basis of one of Linlithgow's letters, in an article published over two decades ago, has any writer brought to light such an abundance of detail about this particular aspect of the Hindutva ideologue. Shourie gives a comprehensive picture of Linlithgow's interactions with Savarkar, citing almost the entire correspondence between the two. These interactions, he writes, testified "to the usual British policy of propping up persons and organizations that could be useful as counters to the freedom movement." Savarkar did not just make himself available, he even portrayed this position, in his party meetings as proof of British recognition of his importance. "What a pity," Shourie writes, "that a 'Veer', one so proud and so convinced of his true worth had brought himself to this position. And how much greater the pity that either he was misrepresenting the true situation to his delegates and the people, or, even worse, that he himself believed what he was telling them."

BESIDES HIS MERCY PETITIONS, Savarkar's relentless efforts "to be of use to the British" after his release, his "begging" during his interactions with Linlithgow, his vigorous campaign for colonial rule during the Second World War and his conscious bid to not be seen even on the margins of the freedom struggle lead to only one conclusion: he was a coward of the first order. Yet, throughout this period, and even afterwards, Savarkar made the strongest effort in his writings to portray himself in a particular fashion, though archival records confirm the opposite. Through a careful study of his writings, Shourie shows that he was constantly trying to conceal his real self while indulging in self-glorification. Shourie could deduce this because, as he says, "I focused on what Savarkar had written himself and tried not to read too carefully what others had written about him."

Shourie's book systematically dismantles what he calls "the halo that has been stuck around Savarkar" and "the image of an uncompromising, fiery, ready-for-death image that Savarkar himself built of himself."



Indeed, there has been a spate of biographical writing on Savarkar over the past decade, since Narendra Modi became prime minister in 2014. Most of these are hagiographies, but even those that are not could not entirely avoid treating Savarkar reverently or believing what he wrote about himself rather than exploring independent and more reliable primary sources. Take the case of Janaki Bakhle's *Savarkar and the Making of Hindutva*, published last year to much acclaim. Bakhle acknowledges the fact that Savarkar was "crafting" his persona through his writings and yet often takes his writings at face value, basing her understanding of the man on them.

"Savarkar never doubted that he was a legendary leader of global significance, and his hubris served him well in crafting for himself a near mythological persona for posterity," Bakhle writes in the introduction. "He did so through his writings, which ranged across the genres of history, biography, historical novels, and Marathi poetry." This is an elaborate way of saying that Savarkar lied about himself in his writings. And yet, she appears to have no

problem believing him—whether regarding his life in jail or his political transformation from an anti-British stance to an anti-Muslim one. It is because of this approach that she was not able to see what Shourie could. Bakhle contradicts archival records by concluding that "Savarkar's anti-colonial nationalism never wavered" but does not produce a single record to support this claim.

Somewhere in the mix, and relevant to consider, is the role of reviewers, especially when, instead of objectively scrutinising the books, they end up amplifying deductions based on the reverential treatment of Savarkar's writings. I got this sense while reading a recent review of Bakhle's book by the journalist Raghu Karnad and his subsequent post on X.

In his review, published in the *London Review of Books*, Karnad underscores Bakhle's comments about Savarkar "crafting" his persona through his writings: "She describes Savarkar's work and poetry without taking her eye off his parallel project as the author of his own legend." And yet, he does not question Bakhle on then depicting Savarkar on the basis of what he wrote about himself. Even more egregious is what Karnad posted subsequently. He dismissed calling Savarkar "a coward because he wrote petitions from the Cellular Jail asking for clemency, or for his release" as a "lazy liberal trope," adding, "I have never liked this. It's a cheap shot, and cruel."

Is it a "cheap shot" or "cruel" to examine Savarkar based on indisputable archival records rather than his self-portrait? What stops Bakhle and Karnad from saying, clearly, that Savarkar was making up stories about himself and that the truth lay somewhere else? Why is it so difficult to talk of the real Savarkar?

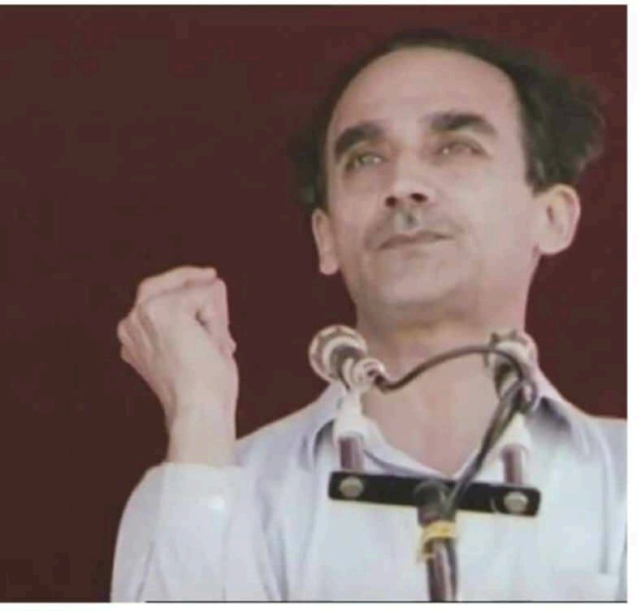
Karnad ended his post by claiming that the "lazy liberal trope" of calling Savarkar a coward "is not working." Although he ended the sentence

there, what he meant, presumably, is that this trope is not able to halt the ascent of the Hindu Right in India. But in that case, what must researchers do? Forego archival records that show Savarkar to be a coward? Or should they indulge in falsifying history and see Savarkar as something he was not?

It is because of these questions that Shourie's book is significant: it systematically dismantles what he calls "the halo that has been stuck around Savarkar" and "the image of an uncompromising, fiery, ready-for-death image that Savarkar himself built of himself."

ALL OF THIS IS NOT TO SAY THAT Shourie has remained steadfast in portraying every aspect of the real Savarkar. His portrayal of Savarkar as a social reformer, for example, suffers from the same problem that plagues the works of writers sympathetic to the Hindutva ideologue. He tempers his scepticism towards Savarkar's writings here, taking Savarkar on his word about his apparent reformist activities, including his fight against untouchability and caste differentiation. "Even in the dungeon of Andamans, where it was enough if one survived, Savarkar found some fellow prisoners being scrupulous about keeping their distance from those whom they regarded as untouchables. Savarkar encouraged all to sit in the same row for meals, to treat each other as fellow human beings," Shourie writes., adding, "In Ratnagiri, he could work against this evil on a broader scale."

Shourie also points out how happy Savarkar was "when the Constituent Assembly adopted the Article abolishing untouchability." After depicting Savarkar as a social reformer on the basis of his own writings, Shourie concludes by posing a set of questions to modern-day followers of the Hindutva ideologue. "What part of Savarkar's writings on these subjects are those who are appropriating him today prepared to accept?" he asks. "How does what they are doing compare with what he advocated? For instance, he berates the caste system no end. Our rulers, on the other hand, are fanning that very system day in and day out." Shourie also asks a more general question about Savarkar. "How come he was such a staunch rationalist in these matters and yet went completely off the rails on others?" The answer to



Given his past, remaining silent or in denial is not an option for Shourie. The absence of even a note on his past association with Hindutva forces or acknowledging his disillusionment with them may invite a host of questions.

LEFT: Screenshots from Lalit Vachani's 2002 documentary, The Men in the Tree. The film records Shourie addressing the RSS at its Foundation Day function in Nagpur, in October 1992.

this, he writes, lies in a specific trait: Savarkar's "image of himself and the ruinous consequences it spawned."

But the answer that Shourie suggests are simplistic since it does not take into account the real motivations underlying Hindutva. And so are his questions, because he overlooks some of the hidden aspects of Savarkar's agenda for social reforms. There is enough evidence to suggest that Savarkar's reformist activities were aimed more at fuelling his Hindutva agenda than at securing any real change in the caste system. They seemed to be driven by his immediate need to unite Hindus of all castes against Muslims. On this, Bakhle's work stands out. She describes Savarkar's social-reform agenda at length, pointing out that, in most of his writings on caste after his release, he tried to villainise Muslims: "Savarkar projected himself as a radical caste reformer, but all his writings on caste were also about Muslims."

For example, Bakhle refers to a speech Savarkar delivered on 11 May 1925, near the Ram Temple in Ratnagiri:

> There were, he said, a thousand years ago a Hindu population of 60 crores in Asia but that it had now dwindled down to 22 crores which indicated that 38 crores of Hindus had become converts and that if this state of affairs continued there would be no Hindu left at all. He advised therefore the removal of untouchability and the taking back into the Hindu religion those who had become converts. He then related an incident that occurred in the Andamans when he was there. The Hindus and Mohammedans were given a bag of parched grain to eat after breakfast. The Mohammedans purposely went and put their hands into the bag given to the Hindus who thereupon would not eat the grain as it was polluted and starved themselves. When he explained the whole thing properly to them, they started eating the grain. Mahars [members of a so-called untouchable community], he said, should be allowed to go to temples and draw water from public wells and they should be considered one degree higher than the Mohammedans.

This particular instance suggests that Savarkar was less interested in uplifting the social status of the Mahar community, and more in a symbolic gesture towards its members in order to further his Hindutva agenda.

His social-reform project never challenged Brahminical hegemony or its vision of authority—something he was apprehensive about weakening. Instead, he sought to achieve his objectives under its aegis. The two are incompatible and cannot be reconciled. This explains why Savarkar, despite speaking and writing against untouchability and caste-based differentiation, never developed a critique of caste nor launched any campaign resembling the anti-Brahmin movements of the time in Ma-

harashtra. Clearly, his caste reforms were restricted to warding off Muslims, not Sanatanists, or orthodox Brahminists. All he seemed to want, was to unite all Hindus into one homogenous group, so as to gain the co-operation of Dalits and other depressed castes while in the pursuit of his Hindutva agenda.

These contradictions in Savarkar's ideas on caste help explain his eagerness to quickly disassociate himself from his social-reform project in 1941, when he set out to strike a deal with Sanatanists to form a unified Hindu front. According to his secretary AS Bhide, when the Sanatanists approached Savarkar with a set of questions, he sought a compromise. "The Hindu Mahasabha and all Sanatan organizations have 95% points in common," he wrote. "On all these 95% points, the Sanatanists can of course work hand in hand to a large extent with the Hindu Mahasabha." As for the five percent on which they differed,

> I guarantee that the Hindu Mahasabha shall never force any legislations regarding the entry of untouchables in the ancient temples or compel by law any sacred ancient and moral usage or custom prevailing in those temples. In general, the Mahasabha will not back up any Legislation to thrust the reforming views on our Sanatani brothers so far as personal law is concerned but the Sanatanis on the contrary should recognise that in public life all Hindus must be looked upon on the basis of equality and should leave the reformists free to bring about their religious reforms etc. by means of persuasion and mental change.

Thus, while Shourie portrays Savarkar as a social reformer, the fact is that the Hindutva ideologue's ideas on caste scarcely had sound conviction. They were never meant to take on the structure in which the caste system operated, nor was he ready to annoy the caste elites. They were primarily a means to further his Hindutva project.

AT THE END OF THE BOOK, Shourie defines Hindutva as "a project to capture, dominate, retain, twist and turn the state." A few pages earlier, in a chapter titled "A Revolutionary Sees the Way," he describes Savarkar's fascination for Nazism and Fascism, and concludes, "When we come to consider the kind of state that is to be fashioned, we will see that the admiration for Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy was not superficial. There was an 'organic' affinity between what they were doing and what he thought ought to be done."

Given the book's accurate definition of the Hindutva imagination of the state, one expects at least a few words from Shourie about his past association with the Sangh Parivar, including the Bharatiya Janata Party. These organisations have never wavered from Savarkar's ideological project and have always sought to implement it. But the book remains silent on this critical issue. Was Shourie uninformed about the real meaning of Hindutva during the period he served it? Did he not know the real motive of the RSS and the BJP while he worked for them? When exactly did he experience this awakening—was it during his research on Savarkar, or when he was left out by the Modi government after winning the 2014 general election?

The question of political transformation does not only beleaguer VD Savarkar, it turns out. In trying to answer this question apropos the Hindutva proponent, Shourie provokes a similar question about himself.

It is no secret that the RSS is ideologically rooted in Savarkar's *Essentials of Hindutva* and that it is the organisation's raison d'être. Ever since its formation as a Hindutva militia in 1925, the Sangh's fundamentals have remained unchanged. This is why Shourie's silence on his past association with the RSS and the BJP cannot go unnoticed by any reader aware of the political history of contemporary India.

For example, Shourie issues a plea in the last sentence of the book: "Save Hinduism from Hindutva." But what about Shourie's own exhortation to the RSS to weaponise Hinduism for the sake of Hindutva, just ahead of the demolition of Babri Masjid? In his documentary *The Men in the Tree*, the academic and filmmaker Lalit Vachani records Shourie addressing the RSS at its Foundation Day function in Nagpur, in October 1992:

> Your name is truly appropriate. You are truly servants of our nation. There is no greater honour than the one signified by your name. The symbols that you have raised are now national symbols. The problems that you were trying to highlight, the nation is now aware of. I believe that the biggest example of this is, to my mind, the movement for the Ram temple at Ayodhya. This is my understanding. It has become such a great symbol. We have to achieve the aims of this movement. This much is certain. If the archaeological and historical evidence of the temple's destruction, if all the evidences were presented to an ordinary Muslim, my belief is that the Muslim would himself have said that leaders like Shahabuddin are mis-

leading us: to say that "breaking the mosque will destroy Islam." Prophet Mohammed had himself broken mosques. It is written in the Quran—Allah approved it in the Quran. Mosques used to be shifted routinely.

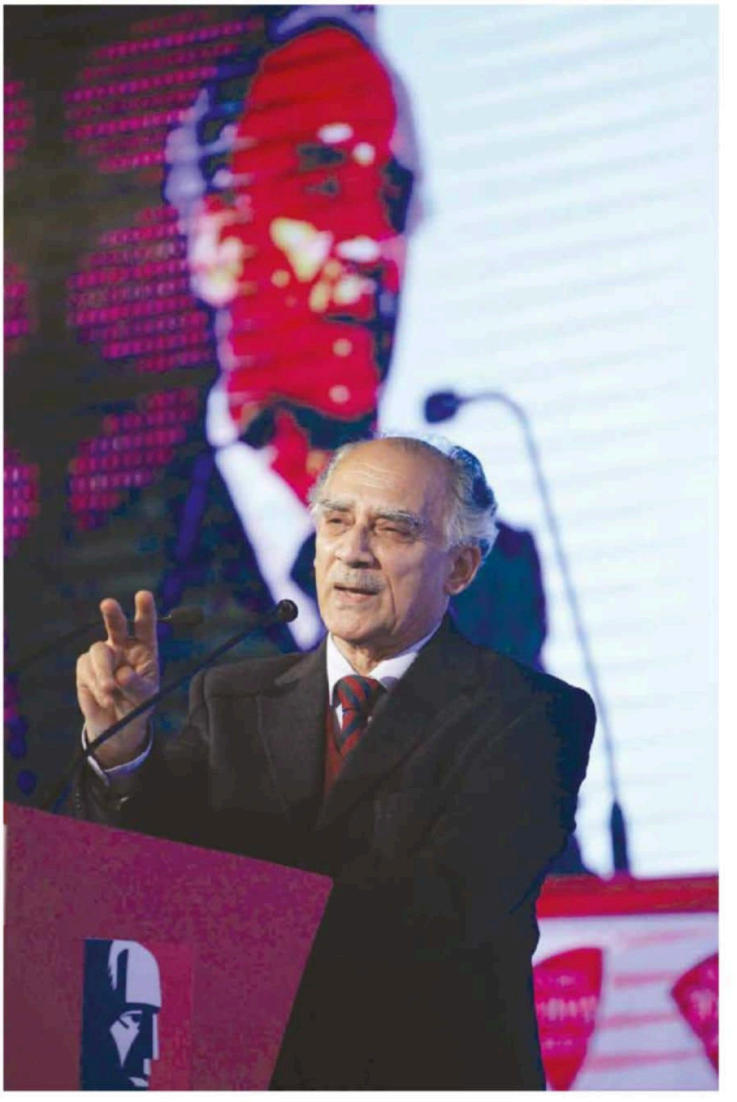
If this was not a call to destroy the Babri Masjid, then what was it? And what an appropriate, timely message it was for the RSS rank and file to destroy the mosque, to use Hindu religious symbols against a Muslim religious site, to turn Hinduism into a weapon for the promotion of Hindutva. The Babri Masjid was demolished two months later. And yet Shourie indicates no remorse in his book, just the plea.

Take another example. At one point in the book, Shourie addresses the perverse notions Savarkar held about certain virtues. "Savarkar is livid with Hindus who forgave their enemies, who showed generosity towards adversaries. Not just an 'eye for an eye', for an eye not just two eyes, the very life, and torn away in the manner that would inflict maximum pain," he writes. "He builds his norm by citing instances where Hindu rulers are said to have defeated their adversaries and then let them go. In each case, his question is: what would the adversary have done if he had vanquished the Hindu ruler? And in each case, the account leads to the lament: if only the Hindu ruler had done what the Muslim enemy would have done."

It is worth recalling that Shourie himself made a similar remark in the wake of the 2008 Mumbai terror attack. "Not an eye for an eye. But for an eye, both eyes. For a tooth, whole jaw," he had said in parliament, while declaring that the Congress-led government should stop seeking help from the United States and take its own forceful measures. No less glaring is the fact that Shourie was among the first national BJP leaders to call for Narendra Modi to be the party's candidate for prime minister, in April 2009, despite the latter having overseen one of the biggest communal massacres of recent times and having shown his talent for converting this into a new source of strength. Modi wholly satisfied the romantic dreams of members of the Sangh Parivar and embodied the promise of the Savarkarite imagination of Hindu Rashtra more vigorously than anyone had in the past.

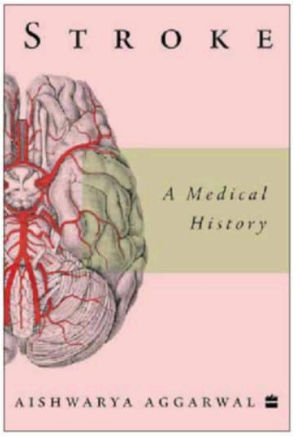
Shourie's attraction towards Modi did not fade in the run-up to the 2014 election. He once told me that Modi had visited his Lavasa residence in early 2013 and that he went to Ahmedabad to meet Modi four or five times thereafter. On 18 October 2013, Modi even released Shourie's book *Self Deception: India's China Policies*, at a function in Chennai.

Given his past, remaining silent or in denial is not an option for Shourie. The absence of even a note on his past association with Hindutva forces or acknowledging his disillusionment with them may invite a host of questions. The most damning interpretation could be this: did the motivation to write this book stem from the frustration of a man who, having served Hindutva forces so assiduously and batted for Modi for so long, was denied a ministerial berth in the BJP government formed after the 2014 election victory? ■



PANKAJ NANGIA / THE INDIA TODAY GROUP / GETTY IMAGES

ABOVE: Shourie at the India Today conclave, in 2014, in New Delhi.

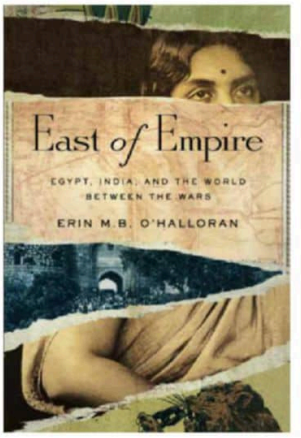


STROKE
A MEDICAL HISTORY

Aishwarya Aggarwal

A stroke, or a brain attack, as it is sometimes referred to, can strike swiftly and without any apparent warning, and is a prominent cause of death and disability worldwide, claiming millions of lives each year. This book traces the history of breakthroughs in the treatment of strokes, including early experiments on clot formation, the development of clot-dissolving drugs, techniques that repair damaged vessels and prevent strokes, and other key moments that transformed the diagnosis and treatment of strokes.

HARPER COLLINS, ₹499, 276 PAGES

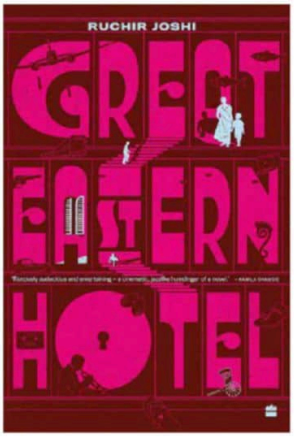


EAST OF EMPIRE
EGYPT, INDIA, AND THE WORLD BETWEEN THE WARS

Erin M.B. O'Halloran

East of Empire revisits relations between India and Egypt in the twentieth century, after the First World War, when their respective leaders understood their movements for self-determination as part of a shared project. This book documents friendships, rivalries, cultural exchanges and political alliances, and, besides the well-known involvement of state leaders, also looks at the roles played by diplomats, poets, surrealists, spies and socialists during a tumultuous period of rising anticolonial nationalism and the partitions of India and Palestine.

STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, $32, 334 PAGES

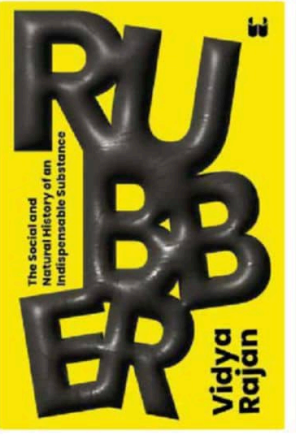


GREAT EASTERN HOTEL

Ruchir Joshi

The novel begins in 1941, on the day Rabindranath Tagore dies and Calcutta is at a standstill. Among the people thronging the streets are Nirupama, a history student and Communist; Imogen, a young Englishwoman; Kedar, the scion of a wealthy family; and Gopal, a young but experienced pickpocket. Their lives intertwine with a cast of other characters at Great Eastern, Calcutta's most luxurious hotel, in a novel that thinks about anti-fascism, nationalism, love and art and a world at war.

HARPER COLLINS INDIA, ₹1,499, 920 PAGES

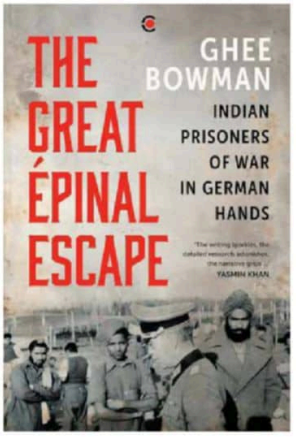


RUBBER
THE SOCIAL AND NATURAL HISTORY OF AN INDISPENSABLE SUBSTANCE

Vidya Rajan

This book is an extensive exploration of the history of rubber extraction, looking back at its use in the Mesoamerican civilisation; Aztec and Mayan beliefs that it had cosmic significance; the patent wars it sparked in contemporary times; the widespread exploitation that it engendered in regions where it was found in abundance, including in the Amazon basin and the Congo; how rubber came to be seen as an essential substance, as well as its impact on the plant and animal words.

CONTEXT, WESTLAND, ₹499, 306 PAGES

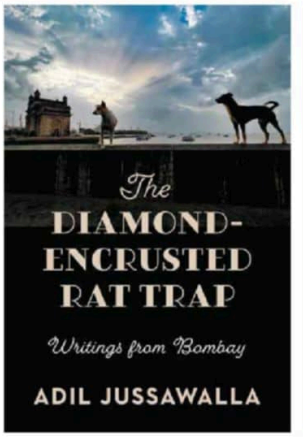


THE GREAT EPINAL ESCAPE
INDIAN PRISONERS OF WAR IN GERMAN HANDS

Ghee Bowman

On 11 May 1944, four weeks before D-day, American heavy bombers dropped 168 tonnes of bombs on the French town of Épinal. At the time, this was the temporary home of over three thousand Indian prisoners of war—this book traces the story of their larely forgotten attempts to escape to Switzerland therafter, which was neutral territory at the time, navigating Nazis, collaborators and over a hundred kilometres of French countryside along the way.

CONTEXT, WESTLAND, ₹699, 272 PAGES

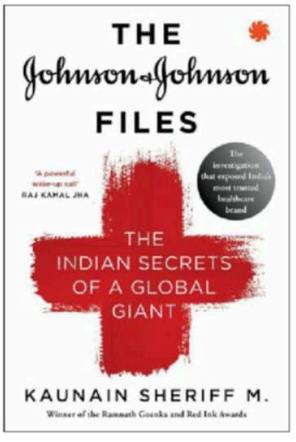


THE DIAMOND-ENCRUSTED RAT TRAP
WRITINGS FROM BOMBAY

Adil Jussawalla

This anthology compiles Adil Jussawalla's prose pieces on Mumbai, written between 1980 and 2002, after his return to the city. It includes a host of observations of the pulsing life of the city, from everyday encounters to property sharks and the so-called "dis-housed," drummers on the streets, a young woman who drowned herself in the sea, ships and dhows on the Arabian Sea, and the way the drama of the monsoon unfurls in the city.

SPEAKING TIGER, ₹499, 160 PAGES

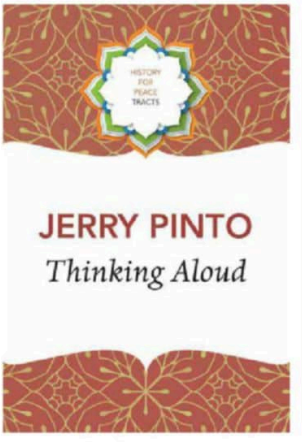


THE JOHNSON & JOHNSON FILES
THE INDIAN SECRETS OF A GLOBAL GIANT

Kaunain Sheriff M

Johnson & Johnson's subsidiary launched ASR hip replacement implants in 2003, but seven years later, these were recalled for leaking toxic metals into patients' bodies. The pharma giant made a settlement of 2.5 billion dollars to the victims in the United States, but in India, most patients learned about this after a delay. This book revisits how the medical scandal was uncovered in India, through the efforts of whistle-blowers, patients and lawyers.

JUGGERNAUT, ₹599, 400 PAGES



THINKING ALOUD
JERRY PINTO

Jerry Pinto

This collection of three essays includes Jerry Pinto's writing on Bollywood and its influence on national identity, in which he argues that good-vs-evil narratives have influenced the public's perception of their past; his reflections on translating texts such as Sachin Kunalkar's *Cobalt Blue* and Daya Pawar's *Baluta* and the importance of biography in challenging monolithic narratives and deepening historical understanding; and his thoughts on the possibilities and transformative potential of education.

SEAGULL BOOKS, ₹299, 150 PAGES

Editor's Pick

BETTMANN / GETTY IMAGES

ON 13 APRIL 1979, soldiers and civilians dance in the streets of the Ugandan capital, Kampala, after Yusuf Lule is sworn in as president, ending the eight-year dictatorship of Idi Amin. Lule chaired the Uganda National Liberation Front, a political group formed by exiles in neighbouring Tanzania who helped resist Amin's invasion of the country, in October 1978, before joining a counterattack that eventually led to the fall of Kampala.

Amin, who had been put in charge of Uganda's military during the 1960s, seized power in a 1971 coup, overthrowing President Milton Obote. He centralised power, dissolving parliament and refusing to hold elections, and unleashed wanton violence, with his secret police estimated to have killed up to half a million people and tortured countless others. The Tanzanian president at the time, Julius Nyerere, refused to recognise his government. Nyerere gave Obote asylum and let him set up a guerrilla force under Tito Okello, a senior military official who had also fled the coup. In 1972, rebels loyal to Obote and Yoweri Museveni, who had established a leftist militant group while studying at the University of Dar es Salam, tried to start an insurgency in Uganda. They were defeated by Amin's army, which was reinforced by Libya and the Palestine Liberation Organisation.

When Amin invaded Tanzania, six years later, demanding that nearly two thousand square kilometres of land between the border and the Kagera River be ceded to Uganda, Nyerere called upon the exiles as part of a national mobilisation. They repulsed the invasion and pursued the retreating Ugandan army, which, having already been depleted by Amin's purges, collapsed after a series of defeats. Amin fled to Libya and eventually settled in Saudi Arabia. Obote won the 1980 presidential election but was deposed by Okello in 1985. Museveni took power a year later and has been president ever since.

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